

MR. AND MRS. ASHETON

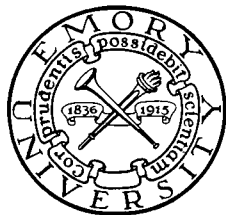
OR THE LISTENING NYMPH

BY AUTHOR OF "MARGARET & HER BRIDESMAIDS"



LONDON: CHAPMAN & HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

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MR. AND MRS. ASHETON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"MARGARET AND HER BRIDESMAIDS," "THE LADY OF GLYNNE,"
ETC., ETC.

"Be satisfied ;

Something thou hast to bear through womanhood—
Peculiar suffering answering to the sin ;
Some pang paid down for each new human life ;
Some weariness in guarding such a life—
Some coldness from the guarded ; some mistrust
From those thou hast too well served ; from those beloved
Too loyally, some treason ; feebleness
Within thy heart, and cruelty without ;
And pressures of an alien tyranny,
With its dynastic reasons of larger bones
And stronger sinews. But go to !—thy love
Shall chant itself its own beatitudes,
After its own life-working. A child's kiss
Set on thy sighing lips, shall make thee glad ;
A poor man served by thee, shall make thee rich ;
An old man helped by thee, shall make thee strong.
Thou shalt be served thyself, by every sense
Of service which thou renderest."—*E. B. Barrett.*

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1864.

MR. AND MRS. ASHETON.

CHAPTER I.

THE MOST DIFFICULT FOR THE AUTHOR TO WRITE, STILL MORE SO FOR
THE READER TO UNDERSTAND.

“AND yet it is a despicable world.”

These words came, as it were involuntarily, from the lips of one whose appearance indicated little reason for so saying. He bore about him none of the marks that might betoken him to be an ill-used denizen of this anomalous world. On the contrary, he was well-gifted with the exterior advantages of health, strength, and comeliness; while his dress had that air of quiet elegance that belongs to the highly-born and wealthy aristocracy of England. His air—his demeanour—bore the impress of perfectness—save the expression of his face—that told its own tale. As his eyes wandered over a landscape in which a sea, a beach, masses of rocks blended with woodlands, an undulatory verdure of meadows, with ripening corn-fields, all alike gilded and brightened by a summer's sun, an involuntary admiration gave to his face a charm, the only one it lacked. But as he drank in one lovely scene after another, it clouded over. The sight of human beings evidently destroyed to him the beauty of the landscape; and not even the picturesque forms of the fishermen, busy about their herring-cobles, found favour in his sight.

“So beautiful, so fair a world, yet so barbarous a race to inhabit it.”

If he said not these words, his face expressed them all too plainly. Each fresh group of the last and greatest work of the Almighty but increased his disdain of them.

And yet, if he had been asked, he could not have reasonably declared that one of these despised beings had ever seriously injured him. They merely clashed against an over-fastidious mind, that fretted itself into an habitual discontent from an habitual warfare against them.

All that he could see around him—the earth teeming with riches, the rose-bedecked cottages embosomed in greenest foliage, the lordly mansion holding high guardianship over wood, field, and dwelling—all that he could see on land was his, or, rather, would be his, in virtue of heirship; nothing but sea and sky, that was within compass of his vision, owned other sway than his own. For though his father was yet living, such was the confidence placed in this the only son, that the elder Mr. Asheton ruled but through the wishes of that son, and issued no other commands than those which were already desired by the younger.

Born with every advantage that the most favoured son of Fortune could desire, few were so truly unfortunate in the results. His wealth but fed the morbid exclusiveness of his feelings—his position helped to prevent that collision with the world which a profession would have forced upon him. And his family heaped up stone upon stone of pride and prejudice, until he was walled in behind a mass of habits, rules, and ceremonies, that destroyed every chance of his being happy himself, or making others so.

Yet was he gifted from birth with kindly dispositions, a generous heart, a frank nature; in the school of over-refinement and fastidious notions he had not yet discovered the use of such good qualities. He was clever; but his talents were useless, being entangled in a net of prejudices. He felt that yearning or vacancy of brain and heart which a really good and fine disposition will experience when its possessor leads an idle and useless life, but he had not the slightest conception how to rid himself of it. Had he been advised to mix with his fellow-mortals, and partake of their duties and pleasures, he would have shuddered as children do at nauseous physic, and turned from the adviser with gentlemanly and courteous disgust. For, let him be ever so bored—let him have a sudden and unexpected encounter with loud, healthy, and irrepressible vulgarity—he always acted with the utmost refinement of politeness. Though

suffering tortures mentally, he, fortunately born an Asheton, never forgot it. They were not without the idea—which, though unspoken, was, nevertheless, an accredited notion among them—that Ashetons had been created, and born among and lived with the rest of the world, as shining lights for the purpose of showing what it ought to contain, and that, but for these Ashetons, it would sink at once into a receptacle for clods of the earth from which they came; an immense bore to the Ashetons, and a grievance that put a mark upon all their countenances, sealing them with the unmistakeable stamp of elevated noses and declining mouths. And it was in reference to perpetuating the race of Asheton, a gift so necessary to the world, that was putting young Mr. Asheton into an extra state of pettishness and disgust this lovely July morning.

Only the evening before had his parents been delicately insinuating how they longed to see him married. It was against the rules of the Ashetons to discuss so delicate a matter openly. Yet, ever since his birth, no other thought had occupied the minds of his adoring parents, than who could, or would, prove a fitting mate for one so faultless as their Godfrey. The peerage had been consulted, royal princesses glanced at, noble and illustrious commoners by no means neglected. As in the case of the superiority of the Asheton race being a sort of family fact—felt, but not mentioned—so was the marriage of the young heir of Asheton Court always the uppermost thought in the minds of those most interested in him, yet never openly discussed. But he was now twenty-seven years old. How it had come to pass that none of those little ladies born in the same fortunate year, and whose ducal fathers, or countess mothers, had so negligently married them to anyone, without coming to seek for the peerless Godfrey, they could not explain.

To ordinary mortals, it was obvious that, unless they ventured out into the world themselves to show their wares, the buying and selling in their matrimonial market would be on a very limited scale. No princess came within the horizon of their hemisphere. Even one of their own stamp, a wealthy and ancient house, unennobled but by their own deeds, was a scarce article in their visiting-list; and it was not without a species of wondering regret that Mr. and Mrs. Asheton, in counting up the number of families to whom they might deign to ally themselves, started to find how exclusiveness, and all the train of dulness that follows, had diminished the list. No one came in state to demand their Godfrey. It never occurred to them to

go into the world they so much despised, and seek some stray pearl fitted for him. They waited at home in royal state and expectation, buoying themselves up with imaginary hopes and somewhat extravagant expectations. No one came. Their Godfrey was still unwedded.

At first they were inclined to murmur that heaven had been so unkind as not to produce a feminine counterpart of their Godfrey. Again, as years went on, they ceased to murmur over an impossibility, and began to question a probability, namely, that—

“Some of those they rejected before
Might now do vastly well.”

They realized the truth of an old song. In fact their anxiety was becoming unbearable; and provided Godfrey married any one of good birth, unquestionable beauty, and faultless manners, they would overlook every other disadvantage. Then they would require nothing further of heaven than to permit them to see that the essential race of Asheton was not likely to become extinct. Like the more common atoms of mortality, they would betake themselves to dust and ashes, trusting their souls to the general heaven for all, which was so far amiable in them, because, from the manner in which they kept aloof from their fellow-mortals on earth, it might have been expected that they would demand a peculiar abode for Ashetons in heaven. They were not wholly unreasonable. In fact, if an impartial judge had to pronounce an opinion upon them, he would have said, “They were good sort of people in their way, and no one’s enemy but their own.”

They were in ignorance of the fact that they owed it wholly to themselves they had not yet discovered how full of hidden beauty and modest virtue is this much-abused world of ours. What they lost by their exclusiveness; what they missed by their over-sensitiveness; what they never saw by the fear of seeing too much; what was unknown to them, because they were enclosed in a fog of Asheton scruples, everyone knew but themselves. Upon the whole, narrow as they had made their circle, and straightened as was the horizon of their experience, they were people of enlarged and generous views. They were also, as people of that peculiar bent are, open to any amount of “gullism,” which, when their natural good common-sense penetrated it, only increased their family disgust of the human race. Models of truth and honour, they turned aside a subterfuge,

and swept away an artifice, with unsparing rectitude. Thus they were highly respected and entirely disliked.

However, we must return to young Mr. Asheton. He knew his parents wished him to marry, and he certainly desired to oblige them. As one mode of doing so, he wandered by the sea, recalling to mind all the young ladies whom he had ever known, as a means of selecting one, and the result, sad to say, was expressed in those memorable words with which we began this chapter.

Diving, as novelists have the privilege to do, still deeper into the heart of Mr. Asheton, we shall there discover that, much as he had reason to be disgusted with the male sex, he thought humanely of them in comparison of the other.

"Why, why did not heaven grant my father and mother the reasonable number of sons that other less-gifted families than ours possess? I should then have been able to devote my life to their society and comfort, rejoicing in their companionship alone, while my brothers could have perpetuated our honoured name. Why was I born so exclusively an Asheton? What injustice to me, of Fate, of Nature, of Education, to make women so peculiarly obnoxious, so utterly unfeminine, so unwomanly in their ways—so unlovely."

"Sir, pray help us!"

Godfrey started. Upon his arm lay a little hand, whose fingers looked like, and touched him as if they were, flakes of snow.

A fresh girlish face, innocent and lovely as the visions in a child's dream, looked up earnestly to his.

"My cousin is afraid. See! she sits there, and the tide has risen; she fears to be drowned; you did not listen to her calls so I have come to ask your aid."

Godfrey's ideas were running upon his last words, "unfeminine, unlovely." He had to recall them both on the spot, though she was dripping with wet, and the spray hanging on her disordered curls.

"Sir, pray help us," she repeated.

"Willingly," he answered at last, "but how?"

"You must go up to that rock, and carry her down. I have been twice, but she is afraid to trust me."

He looked at her wet garments, and then glanced at his own faultless and dry continuations.

"Yes," said she, and, as if in answer, "they will get very wet; but if you will go and comfort her, I will run for one of the fishermen."

"Not on any account," answered he, courteously; why should I fear wetting any more than yourself?"

A quick little sort of comical look glanced up from her eyes to his, then she became demure, as if to make up for even the wish to laugh.

"Your cousin is, I see, Miss Flower. She ought to have known the rapid movements of the tide on this shore, surely."

"It seems she did not," answered the little grave maiden.

"And you—did not you know?" he asked.

"No; I have been here but a short time."

"I thought so; I do not remember to have seen you before."

The shrieks of the lady on the rock now rose loud and shrill, caused by the somewhat rude embrace of a white-crested wave. The little maiden looked up doubtingly into Mr. Asheton's face. He smiled. She did not then know how rare such a smile was, but she was fully alive to the beauty of it. He waited to see if she meant to speak, but she appeared instinctively to know he would do what he could, without an order from her.

Pleased, either with this silent mark of confidence, or her prettiness, he waded through the impatient hurrying waves, regardless of the utter destruction of his faultless boots, forgetting the cause of his unwonted situation in the novelty of feeling an interest about a female barbarian. But that sensation vanished as he felt himself suddenly clasped tightly round the neck by a screaming woman, who implored him to save her, in terms more energetic than elegant. His slow and dignified movements by no means kept pace with her fears, and he longed to drop her into the water, as she shrieked in his ear:—

"Oh! my goodness me, make haste—make haste will you? I'll be drowned, I know I'll be drowned!"

One of the peculiar sensitivenesses of the Ashetons was a weakness for good grammar. It was with a great feeling of relief that he deposited this desperate violater of so many grammatical rules on the sands, hoping to be rid of her. But still in a high state of nervous agitation, she clung the closer, the more he tried to release her.

The little maiden came to his rescue, and, interposing her figure, gradually transferred the clutch of fear from his neck to her own.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Asheton," said she, and she glanced at his wet garments, as much as to say, "you will do well to go home now, and change."

"You also ought to do the same," answered he, aloud.

"Dear, dear, dear! but am I saved? My goodness, what a fright I was in. I thought I'd be drowned. I am sure I'll never go there again—that I won't, and I am so much obliged to you, Mr. Asheton."

"Nay, do not thank me, Miss Flower; your little cousin deserves your greatest thanks."

"That she does, a little stupid thing, as if I would let her try to carry me! We should both have been drowned then, and what a thing that would have been."

The innocent eyes of the little maiden laughed, though she said nothing. Godfrey actually convicted himself with the wish that she would speak. He apologised to himself by mentally saying she had a soft, low voice, musical withal.

"Suppose we make a move homewards," said he, graciously.

That is, he alone felt his manner was urbane for him, because Miss Flower was evidently yet absorbed in her own escape, and the little Miss Flower was apparently unaware of the peculiar gift of Ashetons, and could therefore make no comparisons.

"Your cousin has not been with you long, Miss Flower?"

"No, she has not; that is, she came last Wednesday week—I do not know, Friday—was it Friday, or Wednesday? It couldn't be Friday, that's such an unlucky day."

"It was Wednesday," interposed the little cousin.

"Are you superstitious?" asked Mr. Asheton, turning to her.

"I think not. I take life as it comes; there is enough in every day of good and evil, without anticipating."

Godfrey was pleased. Beyond Miss Flower's constant ejaculations of thanks and bewailments, nothing more was said, but as he raised his hat to bid them adieu at his own gate, the exceeding courtesy and deference with which he did it, drew a blush to the cheek of the little unknown, while her cousin said, "What a polite man he is."

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR BEING WELL SETTLED IN THE SADDLE, THE
READER MAY SAFELY FOLLOW.

MR. GODFREY ASHETON was dressing for dinner. His valet, apparently born for the express purpose of waiting upon an Asheton, betrayed not the most remote symptom of astonishment at the unwonted condition of his master's garments. A spectator might have imagined it was the daily routine of Mr. Asheton to wade through sea-water, come home to dress, merely saying, as a matter of course, "I no longer require that suit of clothes." Not that his coat was much the worse, but it shared the fate of the rest of the suit. In consequence, it might strongly be suspected, of the few tears that poor nervous Miss Flower had shed upon it in her brief possession of a citadel no other female had ever stormed and taken.

Had these drops been of pure sea-water, Mr. Asheton might have held them innocuous; but being human, of the race barbarian, of the genus feminine, the coat was condemned at once.

Mr. Godfrey Asheton went down to dinner, as faultlessly arrayed as if to dine with Her Majesty. But that was only due to his family. Any person ennobled by title, or without the necessary quantity of limbs, laying them down as useless appendages in the service of his country, or a notable inventor of patents, or a wonderful performer on anything in any way, could dine with Her Majesty. But to dine *en famille* with the Ashetons was the privilege of none but an Asheton. The dinner passed off nearly as usual. A nervous young footman rattled two plates together, which caused Mr. Godfrey Asheton to remark to the butler—

"That must not occur again."

"It shall not, Mr. Godfrey," was the reply.

"Quite right, my dear son," said his father.

"Unpardonable," murmured his mother.

Which remarks reduced the object of them to a state of

mental imbecility. Luckily his services were not missed, two brother footmen being at hand.

The repast ended, the dessert arranged, the wine poured out, Mr. Payne, the butler, took one glance to see that everything was as it ought to be, and then, with a profound reverence, retired. Had we been there, the picture would have tempted us to linger over the scene.

A large lofty room, on whose walls hung pictures of stately dames and noble warriors; though life-size, scarce looked they so in that spacious apartment. A bronze chandelier, burnished with a golden edge, bore on its many branches tinted, crystalised globes, that cast a lively glow on the table beneath, while they were reflected back in miniature gleams, and wreathless numbers—a whole cluster in the rich chalice that held the sugar; a sparkling rosy lot, seen in the ruby wine, one stamped on each purple grape, then, large, full, and golden, on the yellow oranges, until it was impossible to say where they were not, the whole deeply coloured and enriched by the reflection of crimson velvet curtains; while they, as most befitted, were enlivened with broad golden borders, and heavy silken fringe, tasselled with balls and cords of bullion.

An ancient sideboard, deeply carved and inlaid with mirrors, reached the ceiling, reflecting back the pictures in various and ever-changing forms.

Ordinary mortals might, perhaps, on that summer evening, have drawn back the heavy curtains, let in the soft summer night, and feasted in the sweet twilight. But Ashetons always dined by lamp-light; and spite of the cool loveliness without, the picture was beautiful within. Neither did the magnificence of the pictures at all detract from the appearance of the living objects in the room. They were all three worthy specimens of the race from which they sprung; old age looking as lovely as youth in the persons of Mr. and Mrs. Asheton.

It was not until Godfrey had critically drank his first glass of wine that he spoke of his adventure.

"My dear mother, are you aware that a third Miss Flower has come to the Rectory?"

Struck, as by an electric shock, that her Godfrey should mention a young lady at all, Mrs. Asheton was too truly an Asheton to exhibit the least emotion.

"No, my dear son, I never even heard of another daughter."

"She is not a daughter—she is a cousin."

Mr. Asheton, (aroused like his wife), "Have you seen her, Godfrey?"

Godfrey. "I saw her to-day, under peculiar circumstances. She acted well."

A deep pause, during which Mrs. Asheton's thoughts, after the manner of feminine thoughts, jumped to a thousand conclusions, and galloped over an incredible quantity of circumstances. Mr. Asheton being a man, and, therefore, less imaginative, recovered soonest.

Mr. Asheton. "May we ask, how, my dear son?"

To this question he graciously responded, giving a short account of his adventure, saying, in conclusion:—

"There was a great contrast in the conduct of the two young ladies: one, quiet and lady-like; the other—as she always is."

Mr. Asheton. "True, my dear Godfrey; poor Priscilla Flower is much to be pitied for a total lack of anything refined. It is marvellous to me that her beautiful sister has not imparted to her some of her grace and ease."

Mr. Asheton and his wife both cast sidelong glances at their son. The eldest Miss Flower was one of those whom, formerly rejecting, they would now gladly accept as a daughter-in-law.

If Godfrey saw these furtive glances, he paid no heed to them, but remarked with quiet imperturbability:—

"An amalgamation would be quite impossible. The beauty and grace that Miss Flower inherits from her Italian mother, could never be grafted on the child of the present Mrs. Flower."

N.B., and aside. Mrs. Flower was the *bête noir* of the whole Asheton race.

Godfrey (continuing). "And yet it is strange that Miss Flower should not have inherited, what I have always been told is a peculiar mark of the Italian race, small hands and feet."

Mr. Asheton (hurriedly). "Has Miss—has the new Miss Flower, the cousin, small hands and feet?"

Godfrey (dryly, as if speaking of a mummy). "Remarkably so."

Mr. Asheton exchanged glances again with his wife, whose ideas again flew off. She soon recovered though, brought back by the emergency of the case.

Mrs. Asheton. "It is about the usual time that I call at Wood Head. Shall you accompany me, my dear Mr. Asheton?"

Mr. Asheton. "I shall be glad to do so. It is some time, too, since we had the Flowers to dinner."

Mrs. Asheton. "I will look in my visiting-book. I think with you, Mr. Asheton, that the time is approaching when, according to custom, they may be expecting an invitation to dinner."

Godfrey. "How shall you go to-morrow?"

Amazement kept both parents silent.

"If you use the chariot, I can ride; otherwise, my dear mother, with a groom as outrider, I can drive you and my father in the pony-carriage."

Mr. Asheton. "An excellent arrangement."

Mrs. Asheton (her thoughts jumping far into the future, so that, regarding this visit as one of ceremony to a future Mrs. Asheton, it ought to be performed *en grande tenue*). "I rather think the chariot will be the most proper. The new young lady might take umbrage."

Godfrey (smiling in spite of himself). "Pardon me, dear mother; she appears but a child. I scarcely think she would consider the visit to herself."

A little dismay entered the hearts of both parents. Whatever castles they had been building must now be pulled down. She was only a child.

Meantime, another dinner was also being served and eaten, about the same hour, at which we again recognize Miss Flower and her cousin. No graceful pictures hang upon these walls, for in truth the room is but low-roofed, and, though spacious, has no look of lofty grandeur as portrayed in the one we have just left.

There are three windows in it, all open too—letting in the sweet scents and sounds of a flower-garden. But the third is oriel built, and hangs over the sea, until it became no stretch of fancy to imagine oneself within the deck cabin of one of Her Majesty's largest ships. Well worn was the carpet within the window space; rarely was the low seat that surrounded it unoccupied; it seized a stranger's fancy at once, irresistibly impelling him to sit therein, while to the occupiers of that house, what stores of thoughts, feelings, words could not that oriel window divulge? To what breathings of conflicting emotions had it not been privy? And what everlasting changing picture did it not give back in return, each most lovely of their kind?

No velvet curtains, with embroidered border, clung lovingly around this beautiful window, but those of well glazed chintz, gorgeous with cabbage roses, and banded with green trellis-work, as if to make believe that roses grew out of the waves.

Within the room, the last rays of the sun reflected back no images of himself in burnished silver or golden fruit, but, on the contrary, glanced provokingly upon the round, good-tempered face of the young lady of the morning's adventures. In vain she moved her chair, called the sun names, and finally jumped up energetically, and drew down the blind, exclaiming:—

“What a tiresome thing the sun is!”

“Oh, cousin!”

Low was this said by her little companion of the morning, and heard by none other. And she noticed it no further than putting on a certain expression of countenance that said “stuff.”

The room was not tidy, the appointments of the dinner-table were meagre and commonplace. The cloth was not straight, the dishes ill-arranged, yet the sumptuous adornments of Asheton Court, faded before the fresh fair face of the young stranger.

It was no particular beauty of feature or complexion, but the expression was so innocent and confiding, the lips so freshly red, the eyes so healthily bright and intelligent, and the figure so lithesome. And yet, near her, in strong contrast, such as few could have borne without suffering in comparison, sat a young girl in the fullest bloom of Italian beauty, blended in a remarkable manner with the Saxon; much above the common stature, with a faultless figure and that beautifully-shaped throat and head that give a regal air to even faulty dimensions—dark hair shading off into many rays of sunny gold, with darker eyes and a fair complexion, Beatrice Flower was an unusual type of beauty, and she knew it, and so did all her family. And she and they may all be forgiven for thinking Asheton Court was no more than a fitting offering to lay at her feet. And it is astonishing that Mr. Godfrey Asheton did not think so too, despite her hands and feet being larger than he deemed proper. In fact, it is extremely probable that eventually, overcome by relentless time, and no worthier object presenting herself, Beatrice would have had the vacant throne offered for her acceptance. At the bottom of the table sat a fine aristocratic looking man, with the fair fresh complexion so common to England. His head was picturesque, almost bald, with rings of fine, fair, now rather white hair, curling all round it. Blue eyes, large and well developed, with scarcely a mark of the “crows' feet.” Life had evidently been pleasant to him. You saw it in the calm, satisfied expression of his face, in the manner that he leant back in his chair, in the very mode of crossing his legs.

There was one little line on his forehead, caused by an episode

in early life, of which we will give a history in due course. But he never turned towards his present wife, that this wrinkle did not somehow disappear. Like many another besides himself, Mr. Flower's personal appearance always charmed at first sight—but by degrees, as the acquaintance ripened, and interchange of opinions, sentiments, might be expected, Mr. Flower lost ground. He was good to look at, but heavy to entertain, and this appeared the greater marvel as he was known to have been in his youth a gay and jovial companion. The change in his character was noticed after the infliction of the wrinkle.

But Miss Flower is speaking, her beautiful cheek flushed with annoyance.

Miss Flower. "I knew, Priscilla, that you were utterly deficient in mere common sense, but that you should have outraged all propriety, besides proving yourself most ridiculous, to such a man as Mr. Asheton, is peculiarly annoying—to me."

Mrs. Flower (mouth and eyes wide open). "Dear, dear."

Prissy. "Well, 'tis no use being angry, because it's done. I might have not done it, but as I did do it, why it's done."

Beatrice. "Poor consolation for me. Mr. Asheton will, I know, think over this scene for months, and shun our society as long as he remembers it."

Prissy (stoutly). "Then he will take a great deal of trouble for nothing."

"I am sure I have almost forgotten it already."

Miss Flower (disgusted and turning to her cousin). "And you, child, have you never learnt that under no possible circumstance ought a young lady to address a gentleman as you appear to have assaulted Mr. Asheton."

Mrs. Flower. "Dear, dear."

Prissy. "She is a very good little thing, and she never assaulted him at all. He was doing something or another—rhapsodizing, or some such nonsense—and never heeding me at all, although I called him by his name, and she just touched him on his arm like that, and I defy anyone to say that's an assault. And if he says it's an assault—why—"

Miss Flower. "Cease, Priscilla. When shall I ever teach you to take things less literally? It is not that I so much care as to whether Mr. Asheton is offended or not; but our little cousin is sent to us for guidance and protection. You will allow you are utterly unfitted for the charge, and therefore it devolves on me."

The little cousin stole her hand into Prissy's, with a smile.

Prissy. "Oh, nonsense! you must not mind me, but do as Beatrice says. Mustn't she, mamma?"

Mrs. Flower (recovering). "True, my dear. Of course Beatrice knows what is most best, does she not, my dear Constant?"

Mr. Flower bowed in assent. It was only in the reading-desk and pulpit that his voice was ever heard, for he was a clergyman. Then, indeed, he made up for his silence during the week, and justified his wife's fond belief that the sermons of her Constant were a panacea for all ills.

Prissy's rejection of her cousin's demonstration in her favour had no effect.

The little thing (not so little either) rose from her chair, kissed Prissy, and then drawing herself up after the manner of Beatrice when in a lofty mood, said, in the low clear voice for which she was remarkable:

"I should do as I did to-day again to-morrow, if Prissy wished it."



CHAPTER III.

THE AUTHOR RELATES THE HISTORY OF HIS PUPPETS ERE HE PUTS THEM IN MOTION.

MR. CONSTANTINE FLOWER was the second son of a general officer, who, early widowed, had to leave his two children to be cared for and educated by any relation who would undertake the charge; he, meanwhile, fighting his country's battles wherever needed.

It is astonishing how such children thrive. How, bandied about from one set of people to another, they contrive to make themselves perfectly at home with all; picking up experience and information as chickens pick up crumbs, and becoming far more valuable members of society than the expensively-educated, the fondly-cared-for, and devotedly-loved children of adoring parents.

Captain, Major, Colonel, and General Flower, as he became in course of time, and the favourite of the Horse Guards, heard but one character of his sons from all quarters; and when the

eldest joined him as junior ensign in his own regiment, he was quite of opinion that nothing had been said too much. Popular as the colonel was himself, his son soon surpassed him. Never had the regiment possessed so handsome, so gallant, so true a gentleman and soldier as Osman Flower. And he completed the measure of their contentment by falling in love with, and obtaining the hand of, one they truly considered as the "Daughter of the Regiment."

She had been born in the regiment, and was the child of the then second in command, Major Aubray. The fairest, smallest myth of a thing to be called mortal. It was, therefore, but right she should fall into the hands of one so tender, so true, as valiant in deeds as he was powerful to perform. They followed the fortunes of the regiment wherever it went, alike the ornament, boast, and pride of it. Their first child they had been compelled to send to England, while they were quartered in India, to the care of old Mrs. Aubray, who could form some idea of her unknown son-in-law, from the lovely features of his child. She bid fair to be a feminine type of him. It was not until eight years after her birth that another daughter was granted them. And then, as if to indemnify themselves for the sacrifice they had made in giving up the one, also being quartered in a more healthy climate, and this little thing being a species of elfin mortal, like her mother, they could not find it in their hearts to part with her.

No matter where they went, how they travelled, there was always some one ready to carry the baby. And the rougher the life, the more she appeared to thrive. It would seem incredible to relate the various adventures, the strange life, the different nurses, the odd playfellows, that fell to the lot of this little creature. No one ever taught her anything, yet she learned by intuition. Evil passed over and by her, as rain-drops on crystal globes. Sickness assailed all around her,—she ever remained beaming and bright; and when, at last, her little fairy mother began to feel that the rest and quiet she had never had could now alone keep her frail life within her, then did her father bless the day she was born, and thank God for the gift of her presence. She was to her mother as dew to thirsty ground, as liberty to prisoners, as light to the blind; and all this from a loving, natural gaiety of heart, and a perception of what was most fitting to be done. Better gifts than learning or physic, in some cases. But a little time more, and the fond, proud old grandfather, the pride of the regiment, his handsome son, with

the little ailing mother, and the darling of all their hearts, were to leave the beloved regiment, and join for good the long separated one, who would not take to herself the love of another heart, until her vows were sanctioned by their presence. In that short space a battle was fought; two lay side by side on that battle-field, dead; and ere the weeping soldiers had time to prepare their graves, room had to be made for a third. She took but little space, the "daughter of the regiment."

While the darling of them all has just avowed herself the champion of the amiable but nervous Prissy; and having been accustomed to love so much, is now pouring out the treasure of her affections upon everything that will permit her to do so. At present, Prissy and the wild pigeons on the sea cliffs have it all—for Beatrice is cold. Beatrice has hitherto been Miss Flower. To give way to a little uneducated, untamed childish child of seventeen is hard. Mrs. Flower is always so excessively busy with everybody's concerns, is so much interested about Betty James's husband having gone off, and Susan Smears's children having every symptom of the measles, that she has not time to attend to anything her little niece has to say; while Mr. Flower kissed her, said she was welcome, and has never spoken to her since. But she is not unhappy. She has seen too much of life, of people, of changes, for all they think she is a mere child, to do otherwise than to make the best of everything as it comes. She is infinitely amused at, and charmed with, Prissy. And could she but dismiss from her dreams that one week of terrible anguish, followed by the long voyage of such desolate woe—could she recall the exquisite happiness of being met and claimed by her sister, who more than realized all she had heard of her, all she had dreamed of her, and yet not fail to remember how, by slow degrees, some fatal shadow had fallen between her and the husband she loved so well, darkening their house with some coming ill, that made the elder sister hurriedly remove the younger one from beneath its dread influence—could she forget all this, and yet be happy? She could, for she had a wonderfully buoyant spirit. She had satisfied herself that her absence was expedient; and as she had always acted by her mother, so she did by her sister, cheerfully obeying her. Her winning, tender letters, full of girlish glee, she felt, rather than knew, would be her sister's best cordial under a separation that both felt now much more than they would have done had they never met.

Whether her presence was particularly welcome or not to her

unknown relations, she did not think it wise to inquire. For theirs was her only home at present, until her sister could receive her again. And that hope was, like all other hopes, clouded with fear. She did not doubt that they would love her; she could love so well in return. If she was a little disappointed at first in her aunt and uncle, she quickly understood their characters, and took what love they had to give, as the best they had to bestow. But it is time to relate the younger brother's history, and how he became marked with that one wrinkle.

Constantine Flower had, as well as his elder brother, the offer of a commission in the army, but his tastes did not incline that way. Colonel Flower could afford to let him wander about the world for a few years, that he might see what it was like, ere he settled down for life, and rather encouraged his wish to do so. If he was to become a clergyman, he would be none the worse for acting layman a few years, and getting rid of a certain narrowness of opinions and ways, that is apt to clog the best intentions of those who live in one habitual life and routine.

He visited his father and brother. He went over to America and saw Niagara, but it is supposed he was not astonished, as he never talked about it. He loved Italy well, and wandered about in it with a true relish for its clear skies, picturesque children, wonderful artistic beauties, and *dolce-far-niente* ways. He carried this liking so far, that he fell in love with an Italian girl of a noble family in Rome. To a man of Mr. Flower's temperament, falling in love was a regular disease. When quiet men take the infection, they have it to the very heart. He rushed over to Spain in the only violent fit of excitement in which he was ever seen, his father being quartered there. This worthy man, feeling that as a father he had been prevented fulfilling a father's duties towards his children, was the more willing to grant them all their desires, if it were in his power; especially with sons old enough to judge for themselves. He contented himself with saying:—

“That as long as there was an English girl to love him, he would never have asked a foreigner to be the wife of his bosom, but that his son might please himself, and take his father's blessing into the bargain.”

Constantine was well content, more especially as his poor ignorant father had never seen the adored object, and little knew of whom he was speaking in such disparaging terms. But his father did more. He made over to him such money as was eventually to be his. Therefore, the course of his love run

so smooth that he was enabled to be married within a month of his return to Rome.

But, old proverbs perversely making themselves heard, as it were, or rather felt, Mr. Flower was to experience his misfortunes after marriage, instead of before. He was a quiet, amiable, domestic man, guileless and warm-hearted as most Englishmen are, when they break through the fog of reserve.

He was gregarious, and liked to enjoy life, with smiling faces round him, and happy voices, in a genial hum, buzzing on all sides.

He enjoyed comfortable little tea-parties, with games of proverbs, forfeits, and such like as adjuncts. He was charmed to do a service for anyone, old woman or young one, it was the same to him—though perhaps he chatted and laughed rather more with the latter than the former.

And this happy-hearted fellow had allied himself in holy matrimony to a dark-browed reserved Italian girl, whose manners were deep and mysterious as the colour of her black fathomless eyes. Within six months Mr. Flower had well wished himself safely tied to the ugliest Englishwoman he had ever seen, provided she was not jealous.

It was all very well to be loved in this frantic manner for a short time. But never to have one moment's peace; not to be able to look out of a window; not to dare to speak to a woman; not to eat, drink, sleep, without scenes that rendered the first unnecessary, the second but too necessary, and the third a hopeless attempt—all these things combined, changed the hilarious young Englishman into a pale, melancholy ghost of himself.

In vain he gave way, until he laughed at himself for his folly. The more he succumbed, the more exacting became his beautiful, adored Magdalena.

Perhaps she was an exaggerated type of her race; perhaps she had heard that Englishmen are inconstant as butterflies. Perhaps Mr. Flower was to have a practical lesson, for despising and laughing at his father's preference for an English wife. But whatever might have been the cause, about a year after his marriage, he was seen rushing from his own house, without his hat, and evidently bent upon doing something very violent—as many Englishmen do when in a passion—and no one heard any tidings of him for three days. Even then he might not have discovered his retreat, but for startling events at home, which rumour spread far and wide enough to reach his ears.

His Magdalena, taking advantage of her interesting situation,

had been more than usually provoking and violent on that day on which he was seen to leave the house, and feeling unable to command his temper, he had left her mistress of the field.

He had done so before, for a few hours, and returned always calm and in as happy a mood as circumstances would permit.

But when the whole day passed, then a night, and another day, remorse and horror seized on the soul of the passionate Magdalena. She became as frantic from fear as she had been before from jealousy; and was firmly persuaded that her husband had destroyed himself, rather than incur her anger again. Judging of him by herself, she pictured him throwing himself down from the topmost ruin of the Colosseum; or unconcerned, in the hot distemper of his soul, as to whether he drowned himself in clean or dirty water, had flung himself into the muddy yellow Tiber.

Probably she would have been more disgusted at seeing him calmly discussing a quiet dinner in a distant village, looking more happy and contented than she, or any other person, had seen him for some time, than if she had herself discovered his mangled remains, or fished up his drowned body with her own hand. Mr. Flower knew his fate was a very bad one, with every prospect that it would be worse, yet to make away with himself, as the best means of escaping it, was about the last idea to enter his unsophisticated mind. But the two fits, jealousy and fear, proved too strong for even an Italian frame to bear. The beautiful Magdalena raved herself into a premature confinement; and though she was told her child not only lived, but was likely to do so, she deemed it no more than just that as the soul of the father had already reached purgatory, the mother ought to go and see how it fared there.

She resolutely refused food, or the commonest precaution, and died a victim to her temper and passions just one hour before Mr. Flower entered the door of his house again, in full bodily presence.

He was too good and tender-hearted not to mourn her sincerely; and after burying her with all honour and solemnity, he bid adieu to her family with abundance of tears, leaving at their request his little motherless daughter to their care; and after various adventures suitable to such a character, he finally took orders, and became a quiet, easy, contented parson, with nothing to remind him of his Italian episode but a yearning sort of paternal feeling.

This he could only indulge in—namely, the presence of his

child—on one condition, said her relations. He must provide her with a suitable mother.

With many misgivings he at last accomplished the matter.

That the second Mrs. Flower should be an exact contrast to the first, every reader must expect. Indeed, she was so very much the reverse, Mr. Flower was quite remorseful, not to say fearful, lest the shade of Magdalena might resent such an insult. Fair, blue-eyed, and rosy, Mrs. Flower was a good specimen of an English girl, and Colonel Flower could say nothing against his son's choice this time, if that was the only quality he required. But Mr. Flower, as we have noticed, had been very wary in his choice, and his English wife was chiefly remarkable for the most invariable good-humour, and a habit of being pleased with everything, no matter of what order or kind.

Now this description of person is in general much despised by the wiser, more censorious world, who think that those "charmed" with everything are so because they have not wits sufficient to judge otherwise, and yet (granting them to be somewhat deficient, though sometimes happy in the category of "where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise") how blest is that neighbourhood in which such a character resides.

Alike despised, yet alike in constant request, the good-natured, ever-charmed fool, be it he or she, is welcome everywhere, and acts upon a dull and selfish lot of people as a warm fire on the benighted and half-frozen. True, they may sometimes be very provoking, and praise the wrong thing at a perversely wrong time; and, also, they may be too officious, offering their services at an inappropriate and inappreciable time, though the week before, these had been patronisingly demanded, and unconsciously drawn upon.

Nevertheless, it is all the same to the good-tempered fool, whether snubbed or appreciated, turned out or sent for, scolded or thanked, that invariable sweet temper carries him over, above, through all; and at last, when he is dead, and the heavy soil of earth, twelve feet in depth above him, separating him so effectually from the world that despised and laughed at him, everybody takes out his handkerchief, weeps and mourns as if he had lost his dearest, best friend; and, in nine cases out of ten, feel that it is so—truly.

Mr. Flower selected Mrs. Flower from a host of eligible good-natured young ladies, because he had overheard one old nurse remark to another, "that never was it known, all her mortal

days, that Miss Sophy had ever been seen out of temper, let 'em aggravate her ever so."

"And now, after eighteen years of matrimony, he was able to corroborate the above testimony; and under the benign auspices of such a temper, had grown into a sleek, happy, corpulent gentleman, enjoying life to the full. He had been so miserable that one year of the Italian episode, it was but reasonable to suppose he had had his share of this world's ills.

Among other qualities that Mrs. Flower possessed was an unbounded admiration for all her husband said and did. So far from anything like jealousy, she only thought—

"Ah! how lucky So-and-so is, Constant is talking to her."

If he went off to visit some friend, and demurred at leaving her alone—

"Never care for that," says she, "think how happy they will be to have you!"

So much sweet content might have palled upon Mr. Flower, but he thought of Magdalena, and turned to his Sophy with increased affection. Indeed, her true motherly love for his little Italian girl would have bound a harsher heart than his to such a fond stepmother.

She was proud of her beauty and accomplishments, unwearied in her motherly love and care, and none had the shadow of the least suspicion to say that the step-child was less loved than her own child.



CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH SOME OF THE PUPPETS BEGIN TO ACT.

MR. GODFREY ASHETON had been guilty of passing his night much after the habit of an insignificant barbarian. He had dreamt a good part of it.

Three several times had he, in imagination, carried a shadowy Miss Prissy Flower through imperceptible waves, and thought himself well rewarded (this was the most wonderful and incomprehensible part of his dream) by the supposed glance of a pair of clear and sweet eyes, that looked out upon him from what

might have been meant for a cloud. In vain he endeavoured to penetrate through this veil, Miss Prissy affectionately clinging to him; he put aside and sought—he imagined himself putting aside and seeking for hours, no figure could he see—nothing but eyes.

As he thought over his dream in the morning, he solved it by remembering that the little Miss Flower, who had besought his succour for her cousin, had beautiful eyes; the sort of eyes he liked—clear and frank. This being satisfactorily settled, he remembered the call that was intended to be made that day; and having more of his mother than his father in him, or his dream influencing him, he decided that his mother's suggestion of the manner of the call should be carried out, rather than his own. It is astonishing how people, whose wealth and position prevent their occupying themselves, as the curse pronounced on the sons of Adam dooms them, make for themselves work out of nothing. Here was a sensible well-educated man troubling his brains about the fashion of a call upon people, one of whom he thoroughly disliked, and the others he thought little about—not even allowing to himself that a young girl, hardly yet introduced into society, was the real cause of this visit—and further debating upon what he should wear! Fortunately, that wonderful valet, who seemed to read into the innermost recesses of his master's most secret wishes, had put out the very suit. Auguring from this that the coming day was about to be a fortunate one, Mr. Godfrey Asheton descended to breakfast in a bland and satisfactory mood. In fact, the unlucky, nervous young footman might have rattled the plates this day with impunity. It is probable Mr. Godfrey Asheton would not have heard them. Who has not felt the influence of an unlucky day, and all the train of annoyances it brings? How, as one vexation after another arises, beginning with the moment one steps out of bed, until one has to go into it again, irresistibly comes to the memory that nursery adage, "If you do not spend Sunday well, Monday will be very unlucky, and all the days following *in crescendo*, until you come to Sunday again." Mr. Godfrey Asheton spent his days so uniformly the same, that it is hardly to be supposed he owed his unlucky days to the non-observance of the Sabbath, when he had them. And his lucky days were equally inexplicable.

Not having time, however, to follow him through it all, we will advance at once to five o'clock, where we find him in a lane, on horseback, listening for the sound of carriage-wheels. Won-

derful to relate, he is three minutes before his time. His watch must be in fault. Ere he can decide to whom he shall trust it, to be regulated, the Asheton chariot rolls into sight, and altogether they pass through the gate that leads to the Wood-head. For the Rectory, meant for the rector to live in, which rector was Mr. Flower, has been abandoned to the use of curates. Its dimensions were of the smallest, its situation within the village, and its state of repair but so-so. Therefore, Mr. Flower was justified in dwelling in a larger, more commodious mansion. There is singing to-night at the village school, preparatory for Sunday, whercat Mrs. Flower always presides, smilingly unconscious of having gift neither of tune nor time. But this obliges them to dine at four o'clock, and the repast is just finished as the Asheton Court chariot dashes up to the door, and simultaneously the door-bell rings. Though the Ashetons have known the Flowers all their lives, they are in ignorance as to their ever dining at four o'clock; and the whiff of dinner that greets their nostrils, as the house-door opens, appears to them as the dinner to be, rather than the dinner done. Mrs. Flower was now and then taken with a myth that the servants had too much to do; therefore, during the prevalence of this idea, they used but one sitting-room. Into it the Asheton Court party were ushered by the maiden, who, stolid at all times, had her wits completely scared by the bewildering manners of the Asheton Court footman, as he parleyed with her regarding the "at home" of her mistress. She would have said "yes" under any circumstances, so that it was just as well the dinner was over. The chairs were in amiable confusion, the room redolent of rather woolly mutton, and no one in it but Mrs. Flower, who was lacing her boots, preparatory to parochial callings. Not one whit dismayed was she. Everybody ate dinners, and dinners would leave their traces behind; everybody wore boots, and though some liked buttoned boots, she always preferred hers laced. The chairs were soon put into a formal circle, and Miss Beatrice was sent for—a host in herself. Under these circumstances, what was there to annoy Mrs. Flower? She looked upon this visit as one of the greatest friendliness, rushed headlong into family matters, as if these alone had brought Mrs. Asheton to see her. Worthy people those, who think everyone is as much interested about their affairs as the parties themselves—but weak.

The Wood-head House was curiously situated on a cliff overlooking the sea. The situation was more singular and pic-

turesque than convenient, for necessarily they were much cramped for room. Boundless as the view was from the oriel window, that was the sole space they had. Either to avoid the sight of Mrs. Flower, who offended his sensitive refinement in a thousand ways, or to inhale a little fresh air, or to look out upon a view worth the infliction of Mrs. Flower's society for an hour, Godfrey soon took his seat within the oriel window, leaving his father to be entertained by Miss Beatrice, who had made her appearance.

For a short time she divided his attention with the view. She entered a room well, she walked well, she greeted people with a quiet self-possession he liked, and she was undeniably beautiful. How well she looked in flowing circles, as he thought (which were nothing but flounces, good reader), of black silk, the body of which sat so tight to her little waist and sloping shoulders. How much the dark colour set off the rich creamy hue of her skin, and how infinitely her countenance was lighted up by most expressive eyes, that matched beautifully with her hair, now black as ebony, in that low-roofed, shadow-burdened room. But those hands—he turns away—also, as she smiles upon his father, surely she is not altogether faultless about the teeth. There is one too many, or one too few, or one too small, or the whole are not quite even; something just hits a sensitive nerve, but ere he can decide, a name strikes his ear—Mrs. Flower is telling his mother what he would wish to know.

“Dear little Puss, just about a fortnight, quite an orphan—pretty child—but not like our Beatrice.”

What more he might have heard is unknown; his attention is distracted by voices outside the window. Looking up, he saw what excited much surprise, for great interest took possession of his features, and ere long, he moved cautiously from the window, and, approaching his mother, said to Mrs. Flower:

“Pray, pardon me, madam, for interrupting your interesting story; I beg, my dear mother, you will give me a few minutes to show you a very pretty picture.”

They all followed him to the window, and looking up, saw a young girl perched upon a ledge of the rock. A little beneath her was another, who seemed oppressed with an idea that she must squeeze herself into nothing, and say “hush” all the time.

“Hush” was expressed in every attitude; for above, around, far and near, flew flocks of pigeons.

As they wheeled in circles, round and round, gradually they

drew nearer and nearer to the younger girl, who called to them in sweet clear voice; by degrees they settled on the cliff, at her feet, above her head, all round her, nay, upon her, fluttering, cooing, and gurgling in many stages of delight. In a few minutes, they were eating out of her hand, struggling for a place in her little white apron, full of corn, kissing, cooing, coaxing her.

"It is my little childish cousin," remarked Beatrice, as they all gazed in silence; "she has some Indian method of taming birds, especially pigeons, with which Priscilla is much taken."

"How pretty she is," whispered Mrs. Asheton, as if she feared her voice would startle the group.

"Yes; is she not?" answered Mrs. Flower. "I'll have her down for you to see. Here, Prissy, Prissy, May, come down and see Mrs. Asheton."

The mischief was done ere they could stop her.

The pigeons darkened the air in their startled flight, hardly less surprised than May herself. Mr. Asheton exclaimed at the pretty sight, as he saw her stand motionless for a moment, like a listening nymph, and then, light as snow-flakes, leap down from point to point, until at last she stood before them all, encircled like a picture in the window-frame. She smiled when she saw Mr. Godfrey Asheton, but, beyond the heightened colour caused by her speed, showed no other emotion.

"Come in, my dear, come in, and be introduced to Mrs. Asheton, who is very kind in wishing to see you."

"I will help Prissy, and return in a moment."

Some laboured puffings and stifled ejaculations betokened Prissy's near advent.

"My goodness gracious me I'll never go there again. I thought I should have had to stay there all my life, and so I should, if you hadn't come to help me."

These words heralded their entrance.

Marion's beauty was essentially fresh and fragrant as roses, while the innocent guilelessness of her expression made the gazer think of Eve just placed in paradise.

At first you would be persuaded she was yet a child, and speak to her as such, but ere long the strange anomaly of staid and womanly remarks, with perfect self-possession of manner, struck the beholder as something out of the common, coming from a mere girl. She was quaintly dressed, too, like an old picture; in the unbleached muslin of the Indies, that will take no shape but that of the wearer. Gathered round her slender

waist with a blue ribbon, it was drawn together at the throat in a similar manner, in most childish fashion, but it became her wonderfully. Rich, long, disordered curls fell from beneath her white straw hat, having evidently escaped from the hold of some more blue ribbons that mingled, half untied, with her fair hair.

The three Ashetons, occupied with their own ideas, forgot all about etiquette and the length of their visit. And as Marian, her heart smitten with a sudden love for old Mr. Asheton, as reminding her of the dearest, fondest grandfather, allowed this feeling to emanate from her eyes and play round her mouth, Mr. Asheton fairly forgot himself.

"Pray, my dear Mrs. Asheton," said he, taking Marion's little hand in his, and drawing her towards his wife, "cannot you persuade this dear, pretty—I mean, would you ask Mrs. Flower to name an early day, waving ceremony, and come and dine with us?—Will you come, my dear young lady?"

Old men, when they see extreme youth and prettiness, are apt to worship them then and there. It may be that they behold once more the images of their earliest youth, or perhaps feel that they are about to leave such lovely visions for ever.

"My dear Mr. Asheton," said his lady in high stateliness, "I will write to Mrs. Flower. I could not think of such informality."

"Oh! pray don't; the letter might get lost; and, besides, I should have to answer it. Most happy to accept at once, I assure you, any day, all the same, I'm sure."

So it was settled for that day week.

As they went home together in their chariot, a touch of genuine nature rose to Mrs. Asheton's eyes.

"If she should prove all we could wish, my dear husband?"

"She will, she will—the lovely little thing."

As for Mr. Godfrey Asheton, though he had conversed the whole time with Miss Beatrice, and not addressed one syllable to Miss Flower, he thought he should not dislike helping Prissy again in a difficulty.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH SOME OF THE PUPPETS BEGIN TO SHOW THEY HAVE STRONGER FRAMES THAN OTHERS, BETOKENING HARD AND UNPLEASANT WORK.

ERE the Asheton Court party had reached their home, some three miles inland, Mrs. Flower was stumping about the village in her laced boots, Marion and Prissy had returned to their pigeons, and Beatrice sat brooding.

Inheriting her mother's character, the jealousy prominent in it, alone told Beatrice that this visit of the Ashetons, out of their usual course, had a purpose in it. And she read as clearly as if she saw in their hearts what was passing in each. They came to see Marion, and for nothing else. In addition to this fact, Mr. Godfrey Asheton's accidental encounter with the girls the day before, was the reason they wished to see her. Now, of all the people who ever visited Asheton Court, none had ever penetrated so far into the arena of its exclusiveness, as Beatrice. She was handsome, agreeable, and accomplished, therefore not only always an acceptable guest, but a very necessary ingredient at the Asheton Court parties, where it need hardly be said dullness and ceremony waited as handmaids upon every guest.

By very imperceptible degrees, she had won her way up to a considerable perch in Mrs. Asheton's favour, prudently eschewing all attempts on Godfrey's, and by this wise conduct she had indeed "great method in her madness," when she thought it would be her own fault if she did not succeed in becoming Mrs. Asheton the second. No other young lady, far or near, had such a favourable position, or brought such powerful claims for their consideration, and, as remarked before, it did seem very strange that Mr. Godfrey had not already succumbed. We fear the demur had something to do with the worthy but insufferable step-mama, or the disproportionate hands and feet, or probably most true of all, that she would be ready, even at the last moment, if none other better than she came within the vista of their horizon, to accept that gift of incalculable value, Mr. Godfrey Asheton's hand. Nobody could swear as to his heart, because it was a maxim of the family, to love according so the manner in which the object of it succumbed and bent to

Ashetons' likes and dislikes, and therefore a heart was an unnecessary appendage in their love affairs.

And now, behold, a vision had risen up,—an object had presented itself, so immediately remarked and sought after, that they had absolutely broken through their own stately rules and whims, to pursue it. Bitterly did Beatrice allow to herself, that this very act showed how desperately anxious they were becoming to attain the object of their wishes; and how nearly the prize was within her own grasp. Disliking the little stranger before, not only because she was of a nature wholly unsuited to her own, but she displaced her from a fancied pedestal of rank, as elder maiden, though not in years, of the family, she now felt justified in hating her.

After satisfying herself during her visit that she was right in her suspicions, she instantly acted upon the defensive. But, alas! as she thought over the expression of Mr. Godfrey Asheton's countenance, when she told him how young, childish, uneducated, was her cousin, undoubtedly he seemed rather pleased than otherwise, and in endeavouring to decipher the reason of this pleasure, she obtained a clue to her own want of success. Of course, her young cousin having no character of her own, he could the more readily mould her to suit his; undoubtedly, knowing so little, she would the more easily learn nothing but what he would wish, whereas Beatrice was ready-made to his hand.

The result of Miss Beatrice Flower's meditations was very unpleasant. She felt convinced the mischief was done. She was powerless to prevent it, and yet she determined to do it, or die; and, as the commencement of her plans, sat down and wrote a long letter, evidently intended for "foreign parts."

The reader will think she was vexing herself very unnecessarily—and so do I. For there has as yet appeared nothing to make Mr. Godfrey Asheton remarked as likely to be a desirable or an affectionate husband.

The ancient and noble family of "Ramiano," from whom the mother of Beatrice was descended, did not think the connexion with a plain English family at all incompatible with their high blood; for that, through successive generations, had become rather poor. On the contrary, they set a full value upon the (to them) incalculable advantages of a comfortable English home, and a certain yearly income in the safe English funds. They had, therefore, always kept up an affectionate intercourse with their (so short a time) son-in-law, Mr. Flower, besides

having to reside with them one year in every three—the little Beatrice. On her journeys to and fro, Beatrice was generally accompanied by some one of her Italian relatives, who gladly seized every opportunity of judging for themselves how good “roast beef” is. Among the number was her cousin, Count Giulio, or, as his English connexions named him, Julian de Ramiano, and now the head of the house. He loved England, England’s ways, and, above all, English girls, to “an adoration.” Among a family remarkable for beauty, he ranked pre-eminent; and having travelled much, besides living half his time in England, his mind was more enlarged than was usual among his countrymen. The letter of Beatrice, when finished, bore his name and direction.

Meantime our story lags.

During that week intervening between the visit and the dinner, besides the return visit being made, Mr. Godfrey Asheton had contrived (that is, he considered it pure accident) to meet the Misses Flower several times, and also (we presume accidentally) he always joined them. Thus, he was becoming more intimate with Marion; out of this intimacy he gathered that she was indifferent to dress and appearance, which troubled him.

Suppose, she should come to dinner inappropriately dressed, over-dressed, or childishly or unbecomingly dressed. He could not discover that she ever thought seriously on the matter, and of course there were other people asked to the dinner. He worried himself with the notion, just as if he had already asked her to be his wife, she had consented, and he was to introduce her as his intended bride; whereas, clearly at present he had no sort of business to discompose himself about it.

Fortunately (for him, as he would not have enjoyed his evening; we can scarcely yet say, for her) she was prettily dressed. Still in Indian muslin, spotted with white spots. Some natural ivy placed in her hair, nothing out of common, nothing peculiar, but her own beaming countenance. Whereas Beatrice looked beautiful, her dress, a miracle of success, consisting, as the gentlemen spectators thought (the ladies knew it was only tulle), of clouds of fine lace. They (the ladies) thought it an absurd dress for a dinner party; but, in fact, it was in very good taste, because it was perfectly simple, adorned with nothing but a few natural roses in her hair, and on her bosom. As for Prissy, she had evidently been the object of somebody’s kind taste. She sat consciously blushing out the fact that she looked very

nice, and was more than tidily dressed. No pins showed themselves anywhere; her chemisette was not high over one shoulder and utterly lost to sight on the other. She had gloves to match, and a pocket-handkerchief bordered with lace. It was a notion of Prissy's, that if your pocket-handkerchief was clean, what mattered it if it was one of the old common set for every-day use? But, above all, she had the prettiest wreath of real fern on her head that ever was seen, made so artistically, placed so becomingly, and looking so fresh, that she was complimented on all sides.

"Oh, but I didn't—it wasn't me—May did it all; and there wasn't time to do two, or fern enough, or we should both have been alike."

"Then remember, my dear Miss Priscilla," said old Mr. Asheton, "always to send here for as much fern as you like; I place it all at your disposal."

"Thank you; how nice," answered Prissy.

Godfrey looked at his father with much approbation; and, altogether, he was highly satisfied at the appearance of all the Flower party. Mr. Flower was always exceedingly pleasant to look at—so fresh, handsome, and *débonnaire*. Moreover, he was animated this evening, as if he meant to talk and make himself agreeable. In fact, a dinner party was his one pleasure; excellent as his Sophy was, she was rather too easy-tempered to have very good servants. If they came to her perfect in their kind, they were sure to deteriorate; therefore, he seldom had a good, tidy, or well-served dinner at home. Consequently, he enjoyed them all the more abroad. Mrs. Flower also looked less objectionable than usual. Beatrice knew the value of making the best of her, and so had superintended her toilet. Added to which, Betty James's husband had never turned up; and she was so occupied in thinking of the best means to discover the truant, picturing to herself the delight of restoring and reconciling them to each other (her favourite amusement), that really, to use her own expression in conjugal talk behind the matrimonial curtains that night, "she had not a word to throw at a dog."

Marion had but one gift—for accomplishment it could not be termed, as she was not taught it—the power to warble forth little musical gushes of strange eirie-like melodies. But as this could not be called into action at a dinner-party, of course her possession of it was unknown, and Beatrice's beautiful voice and excellent performance, as usual, entertained the company. It

was then, at that moment, for the first and last time, that Godfrey drew a comparison between the cousins, and wavered in his decision. Unlucky Beatrice! as she sung, flushed with excitement and the rapturous applause, she opened her mouth too widely to please him. Down she went, below zero, in the thermometer of Godfrey's heart. She might sing like Grisi—Jenny Lind—better than either—yet, if it was necessary to put on a temporary resemblance to a frog every time she sang, she should never sing herself into becoming Mrs. Godfrey Asheton.

He turned to the other, as if to tender his undivided homage, and again, unluckily for Beatrice, was confirmed in his choice by the picture that presented itself to him.

His father was speaking to Marion, who stood with shy, yet happy look, listening, her attitude the prettiest conceivable, the little head just bent forward, one long curl having escaped from the wreath of ivy that kept it within bounds. Godfrey mentally settled that some time or other he would have a statue made exactly in that attitude.

Mr. and Mrs. Asheton permitted themselves that evening to open their hearts to each other unreservedly.

"My dear wife, will you forgive your old husband losing his heart to that little lovely maiden, so innocent in her simplicity, yet so wise in pretty ways?"

"My dear Mr. Asheton, forgive you! Indeed, I should be tempted to upbraid you, had it been otherwise. I know not what charm there is about her. She is certainly not so beautiful as Beatrice; but she has a manner so refined, yet so bewitching, that if indeed I have her not for my daughter, I shall be sadly disappointed for my own sake."

"I doubt it not, my love; there is a grace in all she does. Did you notice our son?"

"Yes, I did, indeed. I never saw him before regard any girl so intently."

"He told me, when out riding to-day, that her cousin had informed him she was totally uneducated, could barely read and write, had been brought up in barracks all her life, and scarcely knew the common courtesies of society."

"You amaze me, Mr. Asheton; surely it is not true. Did Godfrey remark upon such information?"

"Yes; he said, 'that if, under so many disadvantages, she was so superior to most of the young ladies he knew, what might she not become in good society?'"

"Perfectly true; a most just remark on the part of Godfrey.

I have but one wish now, that Ellinor would see her. Her excellent judgment would at once decide me."

"Ah, my dear wife, we have waited so long for this happy chance, let us leave Godfrey to his own free decision. If he chooses this fair little thing, I shall not find it in my heart to allow anyone to make the least objection."

Though Godfrey was an only son, he was not an only child. He had two sisters, both older than himself, and both married. How it came to pass that the daughters of the family were so much more easily mated than the son, may, perhaps, be explained by the fact that they could be sought, whereas it was their brother's duty to go and seek, which we have already intimated he would not do.

They were handsome women, and being well portioned, were not likely to remain unsought; and Cecilia, the eldest, was by a freak of fortune, the possessor of an estate, under certain conditions.

A maternal ancestor marrying into their family, not wishing his estates and name to be swallowed up in that of the Ashetons, had willed both to be borne always by the second son of the then reigning Mr. Asheton. Failing a second son, the eldest daughter was to stand in the place of one, and enjoy the estates, without adopting the name. She had power to make a settlement on it for another life, either husband or child, as she pleased. But in defiance of all settlements, all wills, nay, actual enjoyment of the estates, the moment a second son was born, she ceased to be the possessor, as much as if death had intervened between her and them. A certain Sir Robert Fane, a true follower of the world, and devotee to race-courses, a well-known man on the turf, had not been able to pursue these pleasures without considerably diminishing his patrimony. Now that he was older, wiser, and more experienced, he could enjoy all the excitement of this sort of life without paying so dearly for it. Yet, it was necessary for him to make a good marriage, in order to keep it up at all. The terms on which the eldest Miss Asheton enjoyed a fortune of £4,000 a-year rather took his fancy. It was so like a racing speculation, as to the length of time she might enjoy it; he quite loved her for the excitement it gave him. And, indeed, it is supposed that he attempted to make a good book in betting on the *pros* and *cons*. Perhaps he might not have entered so speedily into a courtship for the heiress, if he had not dived pretty deeply into his intended brother-in-law's feelings, and could guess even better than

Godfrey himself, that his extreme fastidiousness would keep him unwedded a number of years.

That one so unsuited in every way should have gained admittance as a lover into the exclusive house of Asheton may excite surprise. But Sir Robert was a perfect gentleman, indeed a courtier in his way, which is often the case with the wicked ones of the world. Besides, the poor Ashetons were utterly ignorant of the sort of world he lived in. He was eminently agreeable and clever, seemed on familiar terms with a duke, a marquis, two or three earls, and a host of titled people. It reached even Asheton Court that a Lady Somebody Something had died of love for him. Though people acquainted with Lady Somethings know that they are just as silly, and die just as foolishly of love, as plain Miss Nobodies. He gained his point, and married Miss Asheton, and they were a very happy couple. She was gentle and sweet-tempered, highly charmed that Sir Robert always appeared so truly sensible of his good fortune in gaining an Asheton, while he willingly pandered to this little weakness, in return for the means she had brought him for indulging his whims. That his real character was not even discovered by the Ashetons may be partly accounted for by the fact that your true man of the world always accommodates himself to the company he is in. With the Ashetons he was an agreeable, lively Asheton, always most welcomed, always greatly missed and regretted. But, to say truth, he did not trouble them with much of his company. Important business with the duke, pressing letters from the earl, a summons down to Sir Harry's, sounded very well and proper, and he echoed his wife's gentle "how tiresome," with "yes," "terrible bore," and went.

They had one boy, the spoiling of whom was his mother's sole employment and amusement. She had never been strong since his birth. But as long as there was no second son at Asheton Court, Sir Robert did not disquiet himself much. He had a reversionary interest.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW PUPPET, WHO PERFORMS THE PART OF LADY MACBETH ON THE SHORTEST NOTICE.

How Mr. Trevor ever crossed Mrs. Trevor's path is unknown even to himself. Fate accomplished it. Miss Ellinor Asheton being neither the son and heir, nor the daughter and heiress, was, between them, likely to have passed for a mere nobody, but for her own individual character and energy. If she had been born Cecilia, she would have acted like Cecilia, and rested quiet under her position as an heiress. If she had been Godfrey, she would have done the same, but being neither, she must distinguish herself in the family circle. From her earliest childhood she reasoned and argued, no matter about what, until she had fairly established for herself the character of being remarkably clever. This the family not only gladly allowed, but prided themselves upon. As long as she remained at home, nobody gave an opinion until Ellinor had spoken hers. All plans were organised and settled by her. She ruled the whole house. She had certainly sufficient wit always to make her opinions coincide with her brother's, and managed so adroitly as to make his always appear to be exactly the counterpart of hers. And it must be allowed that Godfrey, not having much to love, poured out, of the supply of affections bestowed on him at his birth, the larger half on his sister Ellinor.

As Sir Robert was successful in making the Ashetons believe he was one of themselves in opinions as well as actions, so was Ellinor equally happy in her endeavours to be considered the "clever" one in the family. It was a case of "gullism" in both parties, with this difference, Sir Robert "gulled" designedly, Mrs. Trevor "gulled" herself as well as the others; she was not clever enough to discover that, departing from the dull, but truly refined, character of the Ashetons, she, in reality, was nothing more than another sort of Mrs. Flower, without her good temper.

Mr. Trevor was a tall, pale, aristocratic-looking man, with a small estate in Cornwall, that was all one vast mine. There-

fore he ranked among men as the owner and squire of half a county. He had one defect in person, namely his legs, which were weak, and imparted a sort of doubtful, deprecatory look to his whole person. And he had one mental imperfection—he was hopelessly dull. If he ever gave himself the trouble of thinking up an idea, and the still greater trouble of enunciating it, it was generally most inappropriate, or singularly ill-timed.

It is supposed, with much foundation of truth, that Miss Asheton proposed to him, for the following reason:—Notwithstanding his wealth and gentlemanly appearance, Mr. Trevor was so intolerably stupid, he was shunned and avoided as something too heavy for the strongest-minded to take in hand. Now this was just a case wherein Miss Asheton could show forth to the world her superior intelligence. She pronounced him a clever man, in defiance of all the world; in fact, so clever, that it was no surprise to her that the world could not understand him. The generality of the world did not understand her. But she could talk to Mr. Trevor. Nobody denied this, for all she required was a good listener. There are several species of good talkers in the world. Those who are eloquent, those who are witty, those who are earnest, but the largest proportion belong to those who are good listeners. For though they do not talk, they gain the credit of it. People are always so pleased to be able to say all their say out, that they willingly give credit to the listener for having been “most agreeable and entertaining.”

So that, by degrees, Mr. Trevor really suited Miss Ellinor Asheton. At all events, having declared herself his champion, she could do no less than prove her words by her deeds. But as to which of them proposed, history is silent. It is probable, knowing Mr. Trevor's habits, he might have inferred the wish. But they married, there was no doubt about that, and were the happy parents of two little slim girls, pale and meek, who were being brought up by their excellent and clever mamma on the homeopathic system, both as regarded food, physic, and clothing. Therefore all the winter through, they were little patient sufferers from chilblains, and all the summer they were victims to a perpetual avoidance of sunshine and fresh air. For that great blazing, brazen disrespecter of persons, the sun, tanned and freckled the little white Miss Trevors with as impudent a touch as if they had been common maidens. Winter and summer, the little Miss Trevors gave one the idea of being thoroughly chilled through, and it became a sort of irresistible madness, the

desire to present them with a hot cup of tea, just to see the effect it would have upon them.

Ellinor's marriage was a great blow to Godfrey; but having given him to understand it was quite a duty on her part, he admired and loved her all the more, consulted her as much as heretofore, spent a great part of his time with her, and began to think with her that Mr. Trevor was a clever man. Silence is one of the greatest marks of wisdom. No wonder, therefore, that Mr. Trevor's reputation rose.

Ellinor was more in Godfrey's confidence than any other person. To her he had confided how unutterably disagreeable it was to him, the idea of matrimony, and yet at the same time how peremptory was the necessity, having no brother. Pitying his very proper and truly just feelings upon such a subject, Ellinor suggested that he might make an eldest son of her and her children, answering for it on the spot that Mr. Trevor would only too gladly exchange his ancient name for one so honoured as Asheton. Godfrey thanked her warmly for the generous sacrifice she would make, but hinted how earnestly his father and mother desired his marriage, and how lonely the Court was now without either her or Cecilia. She hinted, in return, that there was nothing to prevent the Trevors taking up their abode altogether with the Ashetons. But apparently he heeded not this further sacrifice. Nevertheless, from this conversation the thought arose in Mrs. Trevor's mind, that the injustice of her being nothing peculiar at her birth in the family, would eventually be atoned for. She would become Mrs. Trevor Asheton, of Asheton Court. And this idea strengthened itself every time she thought of it, until, after the manner of weak brains, it became a settled fact. It will now be seen that, desirable as it was, Mr. Godfrey Asheton should marry; nervously anxious as his parents were to forward all schemes to that effect, there were no less than three parties who would think themselves grievously outraged if he did so.

Miss Beatrice Flower, because he would probably marry the wrong person.

Sir Robert Fane, lest a second son should be born.

Mrs. Trevor, because where would be Mrs. Trevor Asheton?

According to the laws of the Ashetons, it was a high crime, worthy of the only great law they had in their own hands, namely, "instant dismissal," if any of their servants proved guilty of gossip.

Thus matters were going on, in an affair of such vast im-

portance, and not a word was buzzed about it in any quarter. Mr. Godfrey Asheton rode, and walked, and talked, and studied botany with all three Miss Flowers, and rumour was silent.

The more he saw of the little unsophisticated, artless Marion, the more he decided she should have the privilege of the "throwing of his matrimonial handkerchief." But there was clearly no hurry about it. No one was likely to be coming, wooing that way; and even if they did, what chance had they against Mr. Godfrey Asheton?—this idea though gave him an ugly twinge. He was not to be put in the list against any other mortal—that would destroy every pleasure in the matter. But it was not likely, she was so young, utterly unconscious of lovers or her own attractions, and he must wait until September, when, according to annual custom, the Trevors would be at Asheton Court. Ellinor must see Marion before he proposed—he must have her approbation ere he took the final leap.

These were his thoughts as, apparently negligent of there being any other inhabitant of the world than himself, he was leisurely parading up and down a small modicum of sand that the sea was complacently leaving for, apparently, his sole benefit. He persuaded himself this was always the soonest dry and the firmest piece on the sea-shore when the tide was receding; also, it commanded the cliffs, down which a rocky path led from the Wood-head to the sea. There, if anyone was inclined for a walk at Wood-head, they must come by this path to the village, or to the sea. If to the former, they passed by the upper way; if to the latter, the road lay straight to that particular piece of dry firm sand.

He was aware they would now be coming soon. The wild pigeons had been to pay their court to their pretty little tamer, and were wheeling home in various flocks. After the third turn to and fro, he descried them coming down. As they approached, taking the lower path, he discerned four figures instead of three, and one was a male—Mr. Flower probably.

On the contrary, it proved improbably. Mr. Flower's large and portly frame, with measured stately step, was very unlike the lithe, slight, and active figure, the springing step of their companion.

"The count!" exclaimed Godfrey, as they approached nearer. "When could he have arrived?"

And a remembrance of his great personal beauty would flit across his brain, liked he it or not.

It was the Count di Ramiano, who greeted Mr. Asheton with

all the fervour of his race, in the prettiest broken English, and with a face and figure that Godfrey allowed at once were handsomer than ever.

"Oh! he was in such exties to arrive at England; it was as so much beautiful as ever it was, but that it was not of reason of him to think beauty of the country, when he was in presence of such more beauty of the signorinas," and he bowed to Marion in the most marked way, who only just saved Godfrey from a fit of utter disgust by not appearing to regard what the count was saying. In truth, Marion's life had been so full of real startling events, that the rhapsodies and flights of romantic natures were not understood by her.

"Have you been here long?" asked Godfrey.

"I arrive at three days long. I pay my respects to the Signora Asheton, now, presto, for my mail, le mie robe were loosed, I get them but this day; I not be seen in my costume of travel; I keep profound my arrive to all but my dear amicos at the Woodlow."

Beatrice's quick woman's wit had devised a most excellent scheme to stay the intended wooing of Mr. Asheton for her little cousin.

From her knowledge of the excitable nature of the young count, she knew he could not be twenty-four hours in the company of Marion without being violently in love with her. She was just the style of beauty he most admired, and he had been confiding to Beatrice that morning that he had never realised what angels could be like until he had seen that Signorina bellissima, Marion. Being extremely demonstrative, he had already amazed Marion, if not alarmed her, by a vehemence of admiration she neither liked nor could appreciate, and which she would have repelled, but for a remark of Prissy's.

"O, never mind what Julian says; he was once in love with me, when there was nobody here but me and the cat. He's just foolish, you know, that's all."

But Beatrice saw, with a secret pleasure that coloured her cheeks and brightened her eyes, how on the instant the sensitive nature of Godfrey Asheton took the alarm. The count discovered his feelings in every word he spoke—in every gesture. He coloured if Marion's dress touched him; he gazed in rapture if she spoke to him; he saw nothing but her. Even Beatrice, accustomed to his enamoured fits, had never seen him so completely absorbed.

By degrees Godfrey's manner grew colder and more distant.

Beatrice had placed herself by his side, the others walking behind with the count. Ever and anon she saw Mr. Asheton glance behind; each time his look became more stern, and finally, as Marion's soft laugh came fluttering by his ear, he abruptly wished Beatrice good morning, scarcely doing more than raise his hat to the others as he departed. For a week he sulked, and nothing but the evident anxiety of his father and mother roused him at last to a demeanour more becoming an Asheton. They had not, however, been privy to his thoughts on the sands, or the shock that so immediate a contradiction to his settled opinion had given him.

Hearing from his father and mother that the two younger girls had been at Asheton Court that day, claiming Mr. Asheton's promise of some ferns, he so far lowered himself in his own estimation as to say:

"And not accompanied by the count, Miss Flower's *cavaliere servante*?"

"Oh no, by no means; to tell you the truth, I do not think he is a favourite with them. I gained from Priscilla the reason of their taking this long walk unescorted was their desire to escape from the count. Probably he and Beatrice are betrothed, and therefore not such agreeable company as might be."

"Your pardon, dear mother, I was but a short time in their society, one day last week, and Count Julian could see nothing and no one but Marion."

A thrill of pleasure shot through the hearts of both parents, and made them turn their eyes in almost undisguised delight upon each other. The obdurate (though not too much so, considering) heart of their Godfrey was touched, and the slightest possible degree of vexation was in his voice, and never before had he ever called any woman by her Christian name who was not related to him.

Mr. Asheton. "My dear Godfrey, I never made a bet in my life, or stated anything on the word of another, but that my pretty May-Flower, as I cannot help calling her, with her innocent eyes and artless ways, should marry that half-mad young count,—never! I have said it,—never!! never!!!"

Mrs. Asheton (astonished). "My dear Mr. Asheton, pray, pray, not so loud—you astonish me; I never saw you so excited."

Mr. Asheton (unheeding his wife). "Godfrey, you should have seen her to-day, running about the conservatory like a bird, picking out all the rare ferns, and telling me their names with

that sweet voice of hers, and looking up so prettily into my face.

“‘My dear young lady,’ said I to her, ‘you will make me forget my manners, and I shall find myself calling you all sorts of pet names.’

“‘Ah, sir,’ said she, ‘pray do. I have had no one to call me pet names since I lost my grandfather, and I shall love you just as I did him.’

“And the tears came like large crystal drops, and I could not but put my hand on her head, and call her ‘My little May Flower.’ Then her smiles chased away her tears; and as for marrying Count Julian,—never! never!”

Mrs. Asheton. “I agree with your father, Godfrey. Her manners to-day were as free from anything like a love affair as mine might be. She played with my white kittens as any child might do. She made old Turk follow her about as if he had known her all his life, and she coaxed your chestnut mare, Bessie, not only to eat out of her hand, but to let her fondle the little colt. I never saw anyone so fond of animals, or so fearless. I sent them home in the carriage, they remained so long; for we were as reluctant to part with them as they were to go. If Priscilla did not resemble Mrs. Flower, I think I should like her; she is so very honest and downright.”

Godfrey. “I will call to-morrow on the count; I ought to have done it before. ’Tis useless asking him to come here for a day’s shooting, these foreigners are so ignorant of real sport, and a day on the moors would probably lay him up for a week.”

Godfrey made up his mind that night that he would allow the young count a free course. If Marion accepted him, there was an end of the matter; it would not take him as many days to forget her, as he had already been weeks in thinking about her.

If she did not accept him, why, then, he must confess she had lost nothing in his favour, but rather gained. It was not every girl, young as Marion, brought up so carelessly, with no one to love but a cousin Prissy, and nothing to pet but pigeons, who could refuse to be the idol and loadstar of a youth handsome as imagination (which is a wonderful artist) could paint, and who would make her from a little nobody, an orphan and homeless, into a countess. On the morrow he thought still more strongly on the subject, and went in amiable and pleasant mood to call upon Count Julian.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH A PROPOSAL IS INTENDED, AND ANOTHER PROPOSAL MADE.

As Mr. Godfrey Asheton leisurely walked up the cliff path to the Wood-head, he became aware of a figure on a dangerous point of the cliff, gesticulating, and throwing himself about in an alarming manner. Feeling uncertain as to the sanity of the individual, Mr. Asheton dropped his leisurely step, and was up the steep cliff, and down upon the unfortunate, before many people would have decided what to do.

To his surprise, this supposed maniac proved to be the very person upon whom he was about to call. At first the count was enraged at this intrusion; then he changed like a flash of lightening, and burst into a flood of tears. Finally, he embraced Mr. Asheton fervently, spite of all his efforts; and making him sit down by him, declared he was, of all people far and near, the one he prayed of the good God to see. "He was in *miseréré*, in fires, in groans, in much great trouble. If the good Asheton would advise of him, he would be his *servante*, his devoted. He was scorched with his pain of heart, and if it burnt more, there would be of him—nothing!"

Godfrey promised his best, and, as a preliminary, listened for a length of time to rhapsodies that could not fail to be ridiculous to the common sense of an English gentleman, even if they had not been equally absurd from the count's feelings, obscuring what he did know of the English language. The substance of it all amounted to nothing more than that he was madly in love with "La bellissima Marion," "Marian mia," as he said, with an expression and pathos that really touched Godfrey, though he winced at it.

"Mariana mia!" wherefore, then, this exhibition of misery?

"Ah, perche, questo é il perche, Mr. Asheton. I not ask her, I try, I supplica, that is my reason, can you not see? I mad, I have this scorch in my heart, for she smile, she not care, she not give a moment of space of time to say one word."

"Oh, you wish to propose to her, and she has not yet given you the opportunity."

Count Julian embraced Godfrey so suddenly, as a mark of joy at being at last understood that he had not time to escape it. But to avoid a repetition, he removed some little space from him.

"It is quite impossible that I can assist you. If the young lady will not give you the opportunity, I do not see how I am to interfere."

"Ah, ha!" began the count, his whole frame convulsed with a sudden passion, and throwing himself upon Godfrey with the wildest rage, "you love her; you die."

Fortunately Godfrey's strong frame and active habits made him much more than a match for a youth so slight as the count, though his excited passion gave him a temporary strength.

It took but a few moments, not only to render him powerless, but to bear him some distance from the conspicuous and dangerous spot on which this conference had been held.

As Mr. Asheton threw down his burden on the greensward that formed part of a broad terrace, still panting with his exertions, and flushed with anger, he said,

"Give me your reason for such an assertion?"

Sullen and discomfited, the count uttered but one word in answer—"Beatrice."

"Excuse me," answered Godfrey haughtily, "I place that faith in your cousin, as a woman and a lady, she could not have asserted what she never heard from me. Go, sir, as a man of honour, to the young lady's uncle and protector, which you should have done before, considering her youth and innocence. Go; it will be time enough for me to express my feelings towards her, when you have had her answer." And so saying, he stalked away on the highest stilts of indignation, hardly knowing what made him so—whether the folly of the youth, the discovery of his secret, or the unkindness of fate dragging him, Mr. Godfrey Asheton, into a ridiculous quarrel about a young lady he had barely known two months. But his adventures were not yet over.

He was fuming still, having scarcely got as far as the Asheton grounds, to which there was a path running from the sea, up a secluded little dingle that shortened the distance almost half, when he heard sobs, and looking before him, seated on one of the numerous little rustic seats that were scattered along the pathway, he recognised Miss Priscilla Flower. It was quite impossible now to escape her notice, and equally impossible that he should see her in such distress, and not tender his services.

At first his polite offers only caused fresh tears.

"My mother—could my mother be of any assistance?"

"Well, I don't know; perhaps she might. It's all Julian's fault."

"Surely," thought Mr. Asheton, "she is not in love with the count."

Prissy, having found her tongue, proceeded pretty glibly—

"He is—yes, he is, nothing but a fellow."

To Prissy's innocent mind, this was the very worst character she could give him; but Mr. Asheton, not knowing that her vocabulary of vituperative epithets was limited, did not understand the intense degradation she thus heaped upon the count.

"He's breaking my heart, that he is."

Mr. Asheton was ready to laugh aloud in very scorn, at the position he was in. The confidante of Miss Prissy Flower in a disappointed love affair!

"I am afraid I can be of little use."

"Perhaps Mrs. Asheton would hide May for a little in that big house."

"May—Marion, you mean—Miss Flower," and Godfrey sat down beside her, determined patiently to hear the whole affair.

"Yes, he'll never find her there. She says she will go away if that fellow bothers her so; she will leave me, and I love her so much. And it is so wicked of him, because he knows she has nowhere to go. Her sister could not keep her any longer, though she loves her dearly. You should see her letters;—I think, only May won't let me say such a thing, it is all owing to Sir Alan. Men are so disagreeable—are they not, Mr. Asheton? See this horrid Julian—but I'm never going to call him Julian again. He isn't really any cousin of mine or May's that we are to care for him—a fellow!"

Here the pause occasioned by the emphasis Prissy used in this word, enabled Mr. Asheton to put in a question.

"The count annoys Miss Flower, then?"

"To be sure he does; and who wouldn't be annoyed? doing such a ridiculous thing as asking her to marry him only a week after he saw her, and then going half mad because she refused him. And then, is it what a gentleman should do, I should like to know, asking her again and again, and me there, as if people that were real lovers ever proposed when anyone else was by? Such a fellow! Only, to be sure, he could not have spoken to her at all, for she wouldn't be alone, trust her for that."

"I have just parted from the count; he asked my advice

regarding an intended proposal to Miss Flower, but never allowed he had done it."

"Done it, he's always doing it, and Beatrice encourages him, and mamma does, and papa can't be interrupted in his sermon, and Marion says she will go away, and that's why I am crying. Marion has just run up to see the old woman of the lodge, and I was keeping watch lest he should follow us, and I was to whistle to warn her; and just as she was gone I recollected that I could not whistle, and thought if he was to come, what should we do, and that put me upon thinking more, and how if she was to leave us; and then I heard steps, and I was ready to scream, but it was you, and to think of my being in such misery, all through such a fellow."

"Then, my dear Miss Priscilla, dry your eyes and grieve no more. I will beg my mother to call upon Mrs. Flower to-morrow, and ask the favour of yours and Miss Flower's company for a few days, or until the count returns to his own country."

"Oh! how good you are, and so kind. Nobody shall ever dare to say to me again that you are proud and disagreeable. See, here is May coming; now does she not look pretty?"

Mr. Asheton was glad of anything to divert his companion from seeing the surprise, not to say annoyance, which her naïve confessions had excited in his countenance, and he could heartily respond to her last remark. They saw her coming leisurely through the trees, a basket in one hand, and her hat in the other. She was flushed, for the air in that narrow, densely-wooded dingle was hot. She swayed her hat to and fro to the tune of an Indian melody she was singing, and the slight disorder of her curls but added to her beauty, even in Godfrey's eyes. Suddenly she stopped both singing and walking, and stooped down.

"Now, that's to save some poor worm or beetle," whispered the delighted Prissy; "she does not mind one bit touching those nasty creatures, if they are in danger of being trodden upon."

"Do not tell her of our little scheme, if you can help it," whispered he also, hurriedly.

"No, that I won't; perhaps she wouldn't come, you know."

Godfrey felt that Prissy's powers of keeping a secret were very small, but, fortified by this idea, there might be some chance. If circumstances had not already made Marion such an object of interest to Mr. Asheton, she would have become so now, from her manner as she met him.

He concluded, from all he had heard, that she would of course be somewhat confused, not to say nervous, or shyly abashed—he could not say why he thought so. But he would forgive her, she was so young. There was no necessity for any forgiveness or thought on the matter. She was her natural self. As far as she was concerned, the count was a myth. Godfrey saw them safe into their own house, and coming home, made up his mind to do one thing that very evening.



CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH THE PROPOSAL IS ACCEPTED, BUT NOT BY THE RIGHT PARTY.

Scene.—AFTER DINNER AT ASHETON COURT.

Dramatis Personæ.—MR. AND MRS. ASHETON, AND MR. GODFREY ASHETON.

Godfrey. “My dearest mother, my kind father, in asking of you both a boon—an inestimable one—I am that fortunate son who knows beforehand he cannot demand of such parents a favour they might hesitate to accord him; because, emulating their example, he will ask nothing but what they themselves desire; I demand your consent to my marriage.”

Mr. Asheton. “My little May-Flower!”

Mrs. Asheton. “That sweet Marion!”

Godfrey. “Even so.”

Here Mr. and Mrs. Asheton, regardless of their dignity, their exclusiveness, their freedom from all human weaknesses, fell into each other's arms, weeping, embracing, and blessing themselves, all for very joy: totally oblivious that many a Mr. and Mrs. Snooks in the world would act, and had acted, in no other way.

They then embraced their son with so much tearful joy, so many protestations of delight, such thanks and congratulations, that it might have been supposed Mr. Godfrey Asheton had given up the only female he ever could have loved, to marry another of their particular choice. If ever an unselfish, tender emotion entered Godfrey's heart, it was at that moment, for,

touched by the natural and overflowing joy of his parents, a sight most unusual in Asheton conclave, he mentally resolved the first lesson he would teach his Marion would be to love and honour them.

Mr. Asheton. "My dear, dear son, methought only the other day how dull the house looked, when her bright face left it. And she plays at backgammon, too; she did so always with that fine old soldier, her grandfather, the general."

Mrs. Asheton. "And with all her attractions we have the satisfaction of knowing her family is almost as old as our own, besides being limited. I consider it a great advantage that she stands almost alone, with no tribes of brothers or sisters."

Godfrey. "Pardon me, she has one sister, married to Sir Alan Gordon. You remember, perhaps, my dear mother, the sensation a Miss Flower created one season in London, by her beauty and manners."

Mrs. Asheton. "And did you know her, Godfrey? Perhaps she was superior—"

Mr. Asheton (hastily). "That she could not be."

Godfrey. "At all events, she was much more fortunate in her education. She was sent from India as a child, and brought up by Mrs. Aubrey, in as favoured and happy a manner as my own sisters."

Mrs. Asheton. "I would you had seen her, Godfrey."

Godfrey. "Not so, mother; I prefer my little wild maiden. Lady Gordon, from all accounts, might have had, and would be justified to have, fixed tastes and opinions, that, unobjectionable to most persons, yet altogether would not have suited the spoilt son you have rendered so difficult to please. Now, Marion we can mould to be an Asheton, heart and soul, or I am very much mistaken."

Mr. Asheton. "Don't let her alter; I will not have her changed, my innocent little May-Flower. And now, my son, about settlements. In all things, as if you had no father, please yourself. It is the least I can do towards one who never caused his parents a pang."

Godfrey. "My dearest, most honoured father, do not overwhelm me too much. What debts of gratitude do I not already owe you?"

Mr. Asheton. "You have repaid all, you owe me nothing, giving me such a daughter. As my father did by me, so will I do by you, and your loved mother's settlement shall be the pattern of your wife's."

Godfrey. "Nothing could please me better, I return you most grateful thanks. But in one thing I would have them altered. My mother has spoilt me; I could not hope to gain for my wife, one in whom you could place such unutterable confidence, as you were able to do in her. I would wish, in case of disagreement, untoward circumstances, a disappointment in her character (we have known her so short a time), that even before my death, I might have power to accord my wife her widow's dower, on removing myself from her society."

Mrs. Asheton (astonished). "How, my son?"

Godfrey. "Mother, I cannot marry, feeling myself bound to remain and live with a person who might outrage my sensitiveness in a thousand unforseen ways. I must have the power to free myself, and yet not be unjust."

Mrs. Asheton. "But your marriage vows?—the pledge you give."

Godfrey. "Are doubtless stringent. But that peculiar fastidiousness of the Asheton family which I inherit—I fear I must say to an unfortunate degree—renders such a clause necessary, for my perfect content."

Mr. Asheton. "Say no more, my dear wife, this is but a bugbear in reality. My sweet May-Flower will be able to laugh with us all, ere many years are over, at our son's apprehensions."

Godfrey. "She shall have equal freedom. I demand it not for myself only."

Mrs. Asheton (wishing to change the subject). "Now, we must write as soon as possible to tell the joyful news. I know not which of your sisters will rejoice the most."

Godfrey. "My dear mother, in deference to you and my father, I have asked your consent first. It would be as well to say nothing to my sisters, until I have gained that of the young lady."

Mr. Asheton. "Oh! my dear son, how much you have disappointed me. You might have known our consent was only too ready. I thought I would go to the Wood-head the earliest moment of propriety, to kiss and welcome her into the family, and to bid her call me grandfather. I seem to long to hear her call me so, since she has talked so much of my old friend, the general. And it will be a more endearing name than papa, will it not, my love?"

Mrs. Asheton. "You are enthusiastic about her, my dear husband, and make me smile; but of course you will ask her tomorrow, Godfrey?"

Godfrey. "I had not intended making known my hopes to her until next month, after Ellinor had seen her. But the mad conduct of that young count, and the extreme stupidity of her relations have placed her in a situation that, even if I had no interest in her, would prompt me to do all I could to free her from it."

Godfrey here detailed all the events of the day, winding up with some severe remarks on Count Julian's conduct, in not acknowledging to him that he had already proposed and been refused. And further stating it was his intention to seek him the first thing in the morning, extort the truth from him, and in return confess to him that it was his intention to beseech Miss Flower to accept him as her husband.

"By this means," continued Godfrey, "if she accepts me—"

"Of which there is no doubt," interrupted his mother.

Godfrey, to his honour be it spoken, shook his head, though he smiled. The smile did not express that he would be refused, but the shake of the head signified that he might have to fight against some girlish scruples.

"If she accepts me, the count has no alternative; he must leave the country, and she will be no longer subjected to his wild wooing. If she does not accept me——"

Mr. Asheton (vehemently). "Then I shall take her under my protection. I constitute myself her grandfather at once."

Godfrey. "Thank you, my dear sir, for I shall tell her of your offer first; then, if I am accepted, I shall know it is wholly for myself, and that I am in the enviable position of successful rival against, I must allow, the handsomest man I ever saw."

The conversation now took a pleasant turn, not to say joyful, and Mr. Godfrey Asheton went to bed that night with quite a lover-like impatience for the morrow. He longed to see how Marion would look when he asked her to be his wife. He was to go to the Wood-head the first thing after breakfast, and Mrs. Asheton was to follow in the carriage after luncheon, with the double intention of receiving Marion as her daughter and bringing the two girls home with her.

While matters were so delightfully arranged at Asheton Court, the Wood-head was in a state of extreme discomfort.

Mr. Flower's sermon was completely spoiled, through losing the thread of it no less than three times, the count having burst into his sanctum thus often to pour out his wishes and hopes, and to beseech Mr. Flower's interference. His frantic manner, his absurd jealousy, his feminine beauty, all reminded

Mr. Flower so strongly of his one year of misery, that he became stupefied. The count's passionate appeals opened his eyes and mouth in painful astonishment, but nothing more. And even when Marion ran for refuge to him, he only shook his head, and, as she could perceive, was incapable of affording her the least assistance. Mrs. Flower, between her distress at the spoiling of the sermon, meant on purpose for that "prodigal son" just returned—Betty James's recreant spouse—her sorrow for the misery of that dear Julian, her grief for the vexation of that darling Marion, her desire to do all she could to further the match, according to the advice of Beatrice, and her endeavours to break it all off, in accordance with Prissy's indignant remonstrances, was in a pitiable state.

Beatrice herself was anything but comfortable. She had not calculated upon Marion's having such determination of purpose and decision of character; neither did she imagine her cousin would have permitted his passion to outstep every boundary of sense and courtesy. She had often seen him in love before, but never to the extent he was now; and while she preached patience and time to him as the only means to gain Marion, she could not but wonder that so young a girl should have the firmness to resist such passionate devotion.

While Marion wept tears of indignation at the desolate situation in which she found herself, Prissy wiped them away, vehemently disgusted "that she should shed them for such a fellow."



CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH THE PROPOSAL REMAINS STILL UNACCEPTED.

THE morning dawned calmly. The count had made up his mind to appeal once more to Marion, not for any immediate answer, but to give him hopes for the future. The vows he would make to please her, the time he would wait to oblige her, the agony he would endure in silence, to gain her affection at last, were all put into proper English by Beatrice, that they might lose none of their effect from Marion's ignorance of the

Italian language. Mr. Flower gave hopes, if he was left alone, that he might find the thread of his discourse; Mrs. Flower, enchanted to hear this, devoted her energies to keeping guard over him, oblivious of Julian's despair and Beatrice's orders. May and Prissy were discovered to have gone forth very early in the morning, leaving a message that they did not intend to return to breakfast. Fortunately they had made no secret of their plan, otherwise all Count Julian's good resolutions would have been thrown to the winds. Though the servants did not know for what eventual purpose they had engaged old Hugh, the fisherman, to take them across the bay in his boat, they knew that breakfasting with Mrs. Ford, the doctor's wife, was part of the plan; walking home round the bay afterwards, another.

The secret intention of the girls was to ask Mrs. Ford to take Marion into her house and under her care, until the Wood-head was rid of the presence of the count, Prissy remaining rigidly silent regarding the Asheton Court invitation.

Having arranged with Beatrice that she should go to meet them, and, under some slight pretence, detach and detain the too faithful Prissy, Julian took up his most impatient watch upon a point of the cliffs that commanded a full view of the bay, while the confluence of the many pathways mentioned in this veracious history met close by.

It was, indeed, no idle or transient love that possessed the poor Julian. He had admired and flirted with many girls; but, though anxious to marry, not one had really excited his feelings to the extent of love.

Now, as if touched by a Promethean flame, the first sight of Marion had, as even in the case of the cold-blooded, haughty Godfrey Asheton, made a lasting impression. Her peculiar girlish beauty, the innocent sweetness as well as frankness of her manners, the grace of every movement, the redundant beauty of her hair, so rich in sunny shades, her girlish gaiety, yet womanly composure, made her altogether the most attractive creature imagination could picture.

Fearful lest his vehemence was the real cause of her evident dislike, Julian spent the tedious time of her coming in schooling his beating heart to the persuasive eloquence his own language could so well express; and ere she reached the spot intended for the rendezvous, unattended by Prissy, he felt he could die at her feet, murmuring out his passionate love in melting tones, rather than startle her with its violence.

Marion's colour rose, but nothing more, as he stood in the pathway before her.

Dropping on one knee, and clasping her dress, he began his last appeal.

Marion listened as he poured out his whole heart before her, the tones of his voice assuming the melody of music, and his gentleness giving a pathos to all he said, entirely different from his former violence. As he finished by murmuring, if he had not her love, he should die—die—she trembled, it seemed so true.

Some one else trembled also, who had arrived, at this unlucky moment, at the conjunction of the paths.

With utter disgust at his position, yet, under the circumstances, equally unable to withdraw until he heard Marion's answer, Godfrey stood. Had he been guilty of using out-of-the-way language, 'tis probable he would have cursed his unlucky stars.

Very low and trembling was her voice at first, but it cleared and strengthened as she proceeded :

"I like you very much for my cousin, Julian. I am too young, as I told you before, to think of love."

"Ah, no—ah, no," he answered ; "pity me, pity my poor life without your love."

"Then if you think I can love, and you will have an answer, is it not best that you should know I never can love you ?"

"Ah, Mariana, mia Mariana, kill me not."

"It is true, Julian—it appears to me impossible. Never can I think to be your wife."

"Ah, ah," he began, his face becoming livid. "Have care—tempt me not—the curses of my heart are very deep. I will have your love : one day you shall be my wife."

As he uttered these words, with all the concentrated feeling of a love turning to bitterness, Marion bent forward, her form dilated, her eyes grew darker ; from a girl she appeared to become an earnest woman. Lightly touching his arm with her forefinger, to enforce his attention, she said :

"You do not know how to love. When I love, he whom I love shall know it, by the silent deeds of my life. What he wished, I would wish—what he thought, I would divine. If he loved me not, I would discover her whom he did love, and serve her. When I love, it will be after such fashion that I would drive it out of my heart, sooner than trouble him as you do me.

You love yourself best; if you loved me, I should not be thus waylaid and tormented."

Stung to the heart, Julian sprang to his feet, and she shrank in fear, but Mr. Asheton stood between them.

"Pray forgive my intrusion," he half whispered. "I came to speak both to yourself and Count Julian, that I am thus early. You will wish to go. Fly then; I will guard your retreat."

She was gone as he spoke.

"And now, Count Julian, you owe it only to your being a foreigner that I do not at once call upon you to answer for thus forgetting the courtesy and respect due to a lady. Have you no manliness in you, that you can thus torment her to give what she cannot bestow?"

"I will have her; she shall be my wife."

"Never, if I can prevent it. I take some blame to myself that I did not acknowledge to you I loved her. I only refrained from doing so because you told me you meant to ask her to be your wife, and I would not interfere with your prior claims. But you deceived me; you have been refused again and again. Selfish and discourteous, you have not the manly firmness to take your rejection as a gentleman should do. Know, then, that if Miss Flower gives me the permission, the right to act as her devoted servant and intended husband, it will be my business to soften your disappointment, to be to you as a tender elder brother, until time shall have soothed you, and other claims comforted you. But if she does not—if she rejects me as well as yourself—I will yet take care that, unmolested by me and my vain regrets, you also shall have no further power to insult her more with the offer of a love she favours not. Go at once to Asheton Court, and remain there with my father until I return. It is the only thing you can now do to make reparation to Miss Flower."

Awed, if not cowed, by the high command, his disdain yet courtesy, his frankness and the fine honour of his words, the count shrunk back mortified and ashamed; yet, like a weak woman, he was ready to shriek with disappointment and anger.

"I go not. I wait at this place."

"On your honour, then."

But though he received no reply, Godfrey judged him by himself, and trusted his better feelings would come to his aid; and, being impatient to settle his affairs with Marion, he turned, and rapidly followed her.

Now the count had no such feelings—he did not understand

them; and he would have followed him, but his agitation was so great, his knees smote together, his legs failed him, and he sank upon the ground utterly overcome, and here he was found by Beatrice and Prissy.

Meantime Godfrey soon overtook Marion, who had lingered, looking wistfully behind. In answer to her appealing look, he said:—

“No harm is done, Miss Flower, and none is likely to occur, when the count can bear his fate like a man. But even if he does not, I am the bearer of a message from my mother, to beg that you and your younger cousin will take refuge with her at the Court.”

“She is kind—most kind. Mrs. Ford has agreed to take me after this week.”

“I will go over there this evening, Miss Flower, and tell her not to expect you.”

“Thank you; my sister is in grief; besides, I could not tell her, she would not understand, Julian unknown to her, and I should but add to her distress.”

“Say no more, pray. Do you think we are not of the same race and feelings as yourself, and we can bear and see you thus tormented, and withhold assistance? No, no; suffer me to support your steps; nay, take my arm, I have not delivered all my messages, I have one from my father. He desired me to say that you are to command his protection and care, on the condition that you call him grandfather, and love him as such.”

“A condition only too precious to me. I had so many to love once, and now so few.”

“Then you accept his proposal?”

“Will you say, if he is to be my grandfather, he must let me be a real grandchild. I used to do so many things for my own grandpapa—read to him, sing to him—”

“And play backgammon with him, I have heard of that.”

“Ah! then he will make me too happy. We begin this evening.”

And the soft sadness that had troubled her fair face vanished under the influence of happy thoughts.

“I have given my mother’s message and my father’s, and you have kindly assented to each. But there is yet another petition to be laid at your feet, and the petitioner is myself. I fear, sweet Marion, that the name of love has lately been so outraged in your eyes, you will hardly have patience to hear it again. And, in justice to myself, I must acknowledge that deep

as was the impression your first appearance made upon me, and strengthened as it has been ever since, I should have hesitated to offer my hand to you until a more intimate knowledge of my family and myself could lead me to hope, you would look favourably upon us. But Count Julian has not only extorted that secret from me which ought to have been yours first and only, but has rendered a protector in some measure unnecessary for you. Let this plead my pardon, if I have chosen an unpropitious moment for urging my suit."

Godfrey had no reason to be displeased with the various emotions that flitted over Marion's downcast, but expressive face, as he slowly poured forth this harangue.

One start, one look of uncontrolled surprise, revealed also pleasure, yet it was the pleasure of a gratified self-respect rather than love. Having been the victim of a violent and selfish love, he read as plainly as possible how her wounded woman's pride appreciated his mode of addressing her. And he admired her all the more for the proper value she placed upon herself. Not that she was at all insensible to his affection. Her hand trembled, her cheek flushed, the pulse of her heart beat against his arm, and do what she would to prevent it, a smile of happiness fluttered round her mouth—a very different appearance to the aggrieved woman throwing from her the love of the count.

"You are silent, Marion—say, am I to be refused as well as Count Julian?"

"No, no; not as Count Julian."

"But I am not to be so favoured as my father and mother? My petition is to be refused, tell me, dearest Marion?"

"It is so sudden; it is—it is—my life you ask of me."

"True, and not to be idly given. I but admire you the more for this hesitation. Yet if I could have some hope, some tangible reason to give Count Julian—"

Marion suddenly placed her hand in his, the rosy blushes ceased to rise, the clear eyes were raised to his in modest frankness.

"If Count Julian knows of this—if—you have said that to him of me which you now say, he will guess—he will be sure. Mr. Asheton, who could love Count Julian when you—if you—I mean, Mr. Asheton and Count Julian cannot be ranked together in the estimation of an English girl."

That most beautiful of all smiles, the smile of happiness in the heart of a proud reserved nature, flooded Godfrey's eyes with joy, and gave an inexpressible charm to his countenance.

"That is," said he, modulating his voice to the softest tone of tenderness, yet archly smiling, "I may tell the count my chance is better than his."

"Yes, yes," whispered Marion, blushing again with deepest dyes, while her heart fluttered and throbbed.

"But I am not to arrogate to myself any greater favour," he whispered still lower, enjoying her confusion.

Large tears began to fall—one by one.

"Forgive me, I will urge no more;" and, after kissing her hand, he would have withdrawn, but a gentle pressure from Marion's arm stayed him.

"Sir," she said, looking up with her innocent heart in her eyes, "there are but two of us—my sister and I; she is married, and not happy. I should like to ask her if she thinks I am capable of making—if I am fitted to be—a wife; the wife of one whom I might love with a love that angels would weep in pity to see, did I lose his. I should like to ask her, if staking all my happiness in this world upon another, it might chance to be wrecked as hers is; because then he that would be my husband, also, would suffer as he does, that she has married. I can bear my own misery, but I fear, I know, I could not see—could not feel—he was so, and live."

It was as much as Godfrey could do to prevent himself clasping her to his heart. Kissing her hand with the deepest devotion, his whole face glowing with the tenderest love and admiration, his voice broken with emotion, he thus replied:—

"Write to your sister, beg her to come here, to see us—to know us. I will pay to her the homage that shall be wholly yours, when you will permit me the happiness of considering it your right. But remember, if you and she decide against me, bitter as the pang may be, hear now what I shall never suffer you to hear or feel again, that you are the first, and will be the only woman I ever loved."

He paused for a few moments. Then clearing his voice, and speaking in his usual calm tones—

"Until your sister comes, or you hear from her, we are to each other as dear friends; that you never can refuse me, having consented to be my father's granddaughter. We shall meet this evening; to my mother and father, I must confess my state of probation, and to the count who awaits my fate, not even so much, but sufficient to prove to him that my position is more favourable than his. Farewell for a time."

They parted, she evidently struggling to express her sense of all he said, but unable to do so.

If the count had been in a condition to see Godfrey's elastic springing steps, he would at once have conjectured he was the fortunate possessor of Miss Flower's heart, and was coming towards him with the mein and steps of a conquerer. But Godfrey's elation of spirits arose from his delight and gratification at discovering that his perception of Marion's character had been so true. Though not an accepted lover, her womanly hesitation, her sudden exposure of the tender nature of her heart, undazzled by the brilliancy of such an offer, all made him love her yet more than if she had at once accepted him.

Meantime, no count was to be found. Upon inquiry he discovered that, alarmed at the state in which she found him, Beatrice had had him conveyed to the nearest house, one that was used for lodgings in the bathing season; and had, moreover, sent for Dr. Ford. Godfrey spoke to him for five minutes alone, but the stupor of a coming brain fever prevented his comprehending anything but the words "not accepted." These he repeated again and again; at one moment with joyful rapidity, the next with the utmost anguish, plainly showing that he was incapable of distinguishing their exact sense.

Finding he had time to reach Asheton Court ere his mother left, and being of no present assistance to his unfortunate rival, Godfrey hurriedly departed. Promising Beatrice, however, to return in two hours, as much to learn the doctor's opinion as to offer his services, should they be required.

He found his father and mother sitting in a state of fidget that was most anti-Ashetonish. Without being as perfectly satisfied with Marion (after hearing all he had to say) as he appeared to be—Mrs. Asheton, in particular, was amazed at her hesitation—they were delighted with him. Never had they seen him so animated, so happy, so handsome. And apparently he must have been somewhat mistaken in his report, that he was by no means an accepted lover, for the words, "My Marion," slipped out more than once, as he detailed all she said and did. And in truth, spite of that humble and deferential air with which he had addressed Miss Flower, he had no doubt in his own mind that she would be his. Not so much through her selection, but because, something like the count, he was determined to have her for his wife. Never was there seen any mortal not born an Asheton, who could charm him as she had done.

Notwithstanding his excitement and unwonted happiness, he was feelingly alive to the sad condition of the young count; and it was no more than a true finale to the satisfaction of a day such as he had never experienced before, that he heard from Dr. Ford himself every bad symptom was abating under the influence of prompt measures. Beatrice, too, was in a better mood to muse and watch over her cousin, as she gathered from his incoherent lips enough to satisfy her that Marion had rejected Mr. Asheton, in the same unaccountable manner as she had done the handsome and devoted Julian.

Godfrey was very happy that evening at Asheton Court, though only listening to Prissy, relating to Mrs. Asheton all she thought and felt when she first saw May, but he was watching that May talking to, and playing at backgammon with, her adopted grandfather. And strange to say, much as he had admired her self-possession, and the manner in which she seemed to ignore being the object of Count Julian's love, he doted on, and could not resist exciting, the blush that rose so vividly to her cheek when he approached their table—the sort of start or tremor that beset her whenever he spoke. And the knowledge that, happen what would, nothing could induce her to look at him with clear and unconcerned eyes.

Mr. Asheton. "Little May Flower, you play very well; you are as good an antagonist as Godfrey."

May Flower (looking down). "Yes—no."

Mr. Asheton. "Now, would you not like a game with him?"

May Flower. "No, no—oh, no."

Mr. Asheton (beseechingly). "You will like it so much."

May Flower. "I am tired;—I think I can play no more."

Thus Mr. Asheton's first attempt at match-making was nipped in the bud.

As for the innocent and unsuspecting Prissy, she no more conjectured that her darling May had escaped from Julian's clutches only to fall into much more dangerous ones, than she could have thought her mother would have burnt one of her father's sermons.

"I am sure," said she, "it is very kind of you, getting us out of the way. Julian—but I'm never going to call him Julian again—the count was most aggravating with his nonsense. Of course May is much too young to marry. Time enough to think of that in ten years—isn't it, Mr. Asheton?"

She wondered a little at May's sitting up that night to write a long letter to her sister.

"Take my advice, and put off all disagreeable letters until the morning,"

With which advice on her lips, Prissy fell asleep.



CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH PRISSY GIVES HER OPINION OF LOVE MATTERS, COMMENCING UNFAVOURABLY, BUT ENDING BY ACCEPTING "THE PROPOSAL."

THERE was on the cliffs a small natural terrace of the greenest sward and the smallest dimensions. Like a natural throne, gemmed with Nature's jewels, placed in a grand amphitheatre of Nature's building, this terrace contained a rock seat, of which the green sward was the carpet of emerald velvet. It was duly canopied as a throne should be, but no perishable materials were employed in erecting it. A grand and beetling crag bent itself over the throne, and long tendrils of ivy, briony, and periwinkle festooned it. No chandelier was necessary to light up and ornament it, for all day long, as if the sun had no other pleasure or employment, he shone upon this spot, beginning from early morning, and circling all round to dewy evening. Boisterous and rude winds, scared by the frowning appearance of the great beetling canopy, fled whisperingly by, and then, as if smitten with the beauty of the place, would steal in at the other corner, making believe to be soft zephyrs. There they lingered, playing with feathering ferns, hunting about in the greenest moss, and throwing the scent of violets all round. Displacing large velvet leaves, and disclosing the earliest, fairest primrose, until, hearing the moans and groans of their wild playfellows seeking them, they fled out to relate the wonders they had seen, and as silence fell upon their departure, the rippling sound of dropping water beat time to the everlasting boom of the ocean.

The throne was occupied now by a queen; Marion sat thereon, reading her sister's letter in answer to hers, settling the question of her life.

It was Marion's favourite seat. Here none could be molested without ample warning, for by the path beneath, the coming

visitor could be seen, and from the path above rolled pebbles and stones, ever moved by the lightest foot. These fell with a warning sound, pattering like heavy raindrops on the broad ivy leaves. No one saw Marion's letter to her sister, save that sister, so it is lost to posterity; but old Mr. Asheton long preserved the answer, and it is therefore here transcribed:—

“God love and bless my sister in this the most important decision of her life. Dearest, I will answer your questions (so modestly, yet so wisely put) with the one purpose of counselling you, as if I was before the throne of our God. All the more earnest to do it, because in nothing else am I able to show my love for you.

“You seem to think, my May, that so young, so indifferently educated, you are scarcely fitted to be the wife of one as highly placed in the world's ranks as Mr. Asheton. To this I answer, if you are deficient in some things, you more than atone in others. During that brief, that most happy time which we spent together, I was struck with the quiet good sense, the quick perception, the modest self-possession of your character. You know, May, I had to regard my sister as a stranger at first, never having met before. These qualities are not to be learnt so much by education, as they are gifts, and of incalculable value. Is there any home in the world where talent promotes the welfare of it, unless guided by good sense? Your family, your birth, both entitle you to mate as highly as you please. And in hearing that you were loved by an Asheton, I recalled to mind all I had heard of them, for our family and theirs have neighboured together, as you know, for more than one generation. As I summed up the catalogue of their character as a family, how honourable, so that the word of an Asheton was never doubted; how virtuous, for no shade of even a hasty wrong rests on their name; how charitable, I could not but thank God that my sister, so young, almost alone, almost worse than alone, with a sister who was no sister, should have gained the love of one to whom the most anxious parent would gladly entrust her. You say that as yet it were easy to forget the honour Mr. Asheton has done you, for it is not in your nature to love suddenly and at once, and that you were unaware he regarded you at all until he asked you to be his wife; but that if time and the permission to think of him as your future husband were given you, you doubted not your whole heart would be his. Then, my May, in most innocent unconsciousness you

proceed to say, 'that indeed, after having had the offer of Mr. Asheton's love, though you refrain from accepting it through a doubtful scruple as to your power to make him happy, yet you now can never accept or marry any other person,' let me whisper, dearest, that you love him already. Lastly, Marion, beloved sister, a passing allusion (ask me no more) to that one question, regarding my own happiness. Did I not say you were discreet and wise beyond most girls of your age, few would have put a question of so delicate a nature in words so sweetly upbraiding. You say that if a blight, such as that on me and my Alan, should occur to you and the husband you might choose, you could not but fear that it were impossible for you to bear it as I do. Sister, many a time and oft we read of strange fortunes befalling one, singular and fatal accidents another, wonderful and rare afflictions a third; we read of them, and as they touch us not, they pass from our memory. One of these strange fates has fallen upon me, and I would bear it as becomes a Christian woman, yet know, one of my worst pangs was the necessity of a separation from you. But mark me, May, it was for your own good. Again, remember my position will never be yours. I thank God, my sister, the reason for which you ask me the question does not hold good. You and your husband will never be called upon to endure my fate and that of my husband. It is but a small drop in my cup of affliction to know that I cannot obey the kind request for my presence, yet it is a very bitter one on your account, love, as I know you long for me. But with the greatest joy, with earnest thanks to God Almighty, that if, as your only and nearest relative—if, as a mother-sister, you ask my consent to your marriage, I give it. And in accepting Mr. Asheton, you remove, as regards yourself, doubt, remorse, and care from the heart of your true sister,

"KYPHE GORDON."

"My goodness me, May, what are you hiding away up here for? Me and Mr. Asheton have been watching you ever so long on the sands, and at last I said, 'Well, she must have gone to sleep, I'd better go and wake her.' So he said, 'Do, but first steal her letter from her, and bring it to me;' but I said 'there was no need for that, as I dare say you would let him see the letter if he wanted.'"

"It is from Kyphe, my sister."

"Then of course he oughtn't to want to see it—a private letter indeed!"

"But I think I shall show it to Mrs. Asheton, Prissy."

"Well, it's your letter, not mine; so of course you have a right to do as you like."

"It's about something particular, Prissy; I should like to show it to you."

"Very well; only I am not particularly interested about Lady Gordon."

"But it is about me."

"Oh, oh, read away then—I will listen."

"It is about—it is all of love, and that sort of thing, Prissy."

"The stupidest sort of thing in the world; I should have thought you would have been sickened of that, without telling your sister about Ju—about that fellow."

"It is not about Julian. It is some one else."

"Then take my advice, and don't listen to them. Nothing is so nonsensical as love affairs. I dare say now your sister wants you to marry a Scotch laird."

"No."

"Then a Scotch baronet?"

"No."

"Then a common Scotchman?"

"No; he is down there on the sands—you can see him."

"I see nobody but Mr. Asheton and two fishermen."

"It is neither of the fishermen."

"Oh, my goodness me, May, Mr. Asheton? Who says you are to marry Mr. Asheton?"

"He does."

"Oh, May!—oh!—my dear, darling, lovely May—marry Mr. Asheton? Oh, goodness gracious, how nice!"

"I thought love affairs were silly, Prissy?"

"Now don't, May, darling May; be serious."

"I wish to be serious. I want to ask your advice."

"My advice? My goodness, how nice! Of course, I say—"

"Now don't be in a hurry, Prissy; listen to me. Here am I, a young, inexperienced girl——"

"You are, Marion."

"I can read and write, having taught myself——"

"You are, Marion."

"I shall have three hundred pounds a year in riches——"

"You are, Marion."

"Now he is clever, of an experienced age——"

"But not Marion."

"Highly educated, accomplished, and refined——"

"But not Marion."

"Wonderfully rich, and gifted in every way——"

"But not Marion, so none of these things are worth that."

"Then, Prissy, you think I may accept him, and not fear that he is too good and great for me."

"Accept him, indeed—accept him at once; it is you that are too good for him. Oh, how very nice!"

"Then, Prissy, will you go down? But I don't see him now."

"I dare say he is only sitting below, waiting. I'll not be a minute running down."

"And tell him——"

"Yes, and tell him——"

"That I have gone home."

"Indeed, I'll do no such thing. A pretty sort of love message, that!"

"Well, what would you say?"

"I should run down, and say, 'Mr. Asheton, please to come up.'"

"Oh, Prissy, and I to wait here to receive him!"

"Why not? If I had a lover, which I had for a week—Julian, you know—though I did not like him, so of course I can't exactly tell, but I wouldn't shilly-shally with him."

"I don't understand you—shilly-shally."

"Yes, if he is your lover, and going to be your husband—but stop; what sort of a letter is your sister's?—does she consent?"

"Yes; she seems very glad—joyful!"

"Then I think very much better of her than I did. Of course, then, I must send Mr. Asheton up here; then you can hold out the letter to him, which will save you speaking; then he will say to me, 'Miss Priscilla, I beg you'll retire,' in his grand——"

"Miss Priscilla, I beg you will retire."

Prissy shrieked aloud. There he stood, smiling.

"My kind messenger appeared to me to have fallen asleep also," said he to Marion, bowing, with his hat off. "I thought you would see me coming up."

"She has got a letter," gasped out Prissy, still breathless with her fright, but alive to seeing that Marion, covered with confusion, was secreting it.

"May I take it, do you think, Priscilla, as she will not hold it out to me?"

So saying, with gentle force, he took the letter from her; but as he did so, Marion turned and ran up the upper path, and

before Prissy and Mr. Asheton could recover their surprise, the pattering down of little pebbles showed she was beyond catching.

"Good gracious! it was me who was to go."

"Probably she wished not to see me read her letter."

"Just so, you may be sure it's that."

"Then, my kind Priscilla—soon I hope to call cousin—perhaps you can follow her, and so arrange that I may see her alone, to return her letter."

"To be sure, so I will; and, Mr. Asheton, pray accept my congratulations. I don't think there is anybody in the world like May; but if she is to be married, I am very glad it is to you."



CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH, SPITE OF PRISSY'S APPROBATION, THE BANNIS ARE NEARLY FORBIDDEN.

BEFORE that day was over, Beatrice learnt that her scheme had failed. Also, before that day was over, letters, conveying the important news, were written and despatched to various quarters. Meanwhile, Marion had been kissed and blessed as their daughter by old Mr. and Mrs. Asheton, to whom she whispered, "You must tell me—you must teach me—to be worthy of him, because I cannot think so yet."

"Pretty little modest creature," said the old gentleman to Mrs. Asheton, as they sat talking over the whole affair, "I almost think she is—"

"I can readily believe she will be so before long, my dear Mr. Asheton," answered the lady, "for I can only find one fault with her, and that is, a disposition to consider her inferiors as her equals. You remember the day we overtook her, carrying old Margaret Jones's faggot of sticks?"

"Yes, I thought how pretty she looked, carrying it so deftly on her head. She tells me she learnt to balance herself thus in India, and I dare say, my dear wife it is the reason she carries herself so well."

"Perhaps so, but what may be pretty in Miss Flower is not to be tolerated in Mrs. Asheton. She must be taught to keep her station intact. Now I noticed she is as attentive to Mrs. Kearn as to Mrs. Ford, which is not correct, the former being an agent's wife."

"Godfrey will soon set all that to rights. How happy he looks!"

"Yes, and how well his happiness becomes him. But this sad desire of his about the marriage—I fear the country will think it so wonderfully strange—no rejoicings, no grand *fête*, no one asked to it."

"We gave very grand *fêtes* at our daughters' marriages, my dear wife."

"That is the very reason it will be expected of us to celebrate our son's marriage with still greater *éclat*."

"But if he forbids it, we must not gainsay him, though I would have all the world rejoice."

"It is certainly true, Mr. Asheton, that the marriage festivities generally proceed from the bride's family, and we cannot expect the Flowers to bear such an expense, and in fact they have not the experience to do it. But still I fear lest people should say, when they hear of this marriage, celebrated in so private a manner, there is some latent cause for it—that we are not perfectly satisfied—the marriage is beneath our son."

"My love, 'tis useless to distress yourself. If the Flowers were capable of celebrating the marriage in the most sumptuous manner, Godfrey would not suffer it. He told me himself at his sisters' marriages, that he never would undergo such an ordeal at his own. The little May Flower seems better pleased than himself, that it should be perfectly private; and so that he is married, what more can we desire?"

I will try to console myself as you do, Mr. Asheton; there is one thing in our power, and that is to celebrate Marion's introduction to the world, as Mrs. Godfrey Asheton, by a series of *fêtes* upon their return from the honeymoon."

"An excellent plan; we may defy the ill opinion of the world then. Dear little thing, how I shall love to see her acting the great lady, as I know she will do, perfectly to our satisfaction. And remember, my dear wife, I present her with all her dresses. You will take care that they are as pretty as she is herself, and don't spare my purse."

"She will, I know, feel your kindness, though probably she cannot at her age lament, as I do over the degeneracy of the

world. It is but too true that good blood and the highest breeding are scarcely so much regarded as richness of dress."

"Well, good night, my love; by this time Ellinor, at all events, knows the charming news, and how she is rejoicing over it!"

Mr. and Mrs. Trevor rented a house within thirty miles of Asheton Court; for in Cornwall, whatever may be the riches under the surface, the upper part of Mr. Trevor's estate was very poor indeed, and boasted nothing like a mansion upon it. Mrs. Trevor was always talking of the house they were to build, or rather castle, for she spoke of Trevor castle as an abode in such complete existence, that she deluded some of her friends into proposing paying her visits, whereas not a stone of it was laid—not the site even chosen. But of late years since that charming cognomen of Mrs. Trevor Asheton had become so familiar to her mind, she had of course reasoned with herself that it was absurd to build Trevor castle, when they would eventually be settled at Asheton Court; consequently they rented a house called Mannering Hall, which name, some folks said, only required a *G* in it, to be very appropriately named.

Thus a purpose messenger was sent over to Mannering Hall, with the important news of Mr. Godfrey Asheton's intended marriage. As Sir Robert Fane did not hear of it until the following day, through the ordinary medium of the post, we will treat of Mrs. Trevor's "delight" first.

Has no one of my readers experienced a day of unwonted satisfaction, or a time of high self-sufficiency. When all that has passed throughout the day has been pleasant, and that pleasantness has been owing entirely to yourself—your wisdom, your forethought, your superior judgment. Mrs. Trevor was in one of these moods on this particular day; she had begun it by bullying Mr. Trevor's mining agent, who had come over on business, and so satisfactorily, that she had made him confess "Mrs. Trevor surprised him." What a delightful homage to her judgment! She "surprised" that wonderful man, the mining agent, who was not supposed to know what being "surprised" was.

"I should not at all wonder," said she to Mr. Trevor, "if you now obtain your just and proper income for the future; the man will be afraid of me."

Also she had gained a notable victory over that remarkably clever woman, Miss Pratt, her daughters' governess.

Miss Pratt had declared a new plant to be of the genus

"cheirostemon," because the calyx was sparsely stellate-pubescent outside, and densely villeis within.

Mrs. Trevor said "no such thing."

"Miss Pratt, upon investigation, had to acknowledge herself mistaken, but she hesitated in according to Mrs. Trevor superior knowledge; and she was certainly not mistaken in that, for Mrs. Trevor had only contradicted her for contradiction's sake.

Finally, she had, accompanied by her husband, attended a dinner party in the neighbourhood, where she made herself, as she considered, peculiarly agreeable.

"I took care to show my lord, though I was a woman, I was perfectly capable of giving an opinion on the whole, and he soon perceived it. I must do him the justice to say, that he did not utter a word after that."

"Of course, dear Ellinor."

"In fact, the neighbourhood is becoming now pretty well aware that there is no deceiving me. It is astonishing the silence and respect with which they listen to me. I look forward to a time, Trevor (Mr. Trevor's name was Thomas, which was the only thing Mrs. Trevor did not like about him), when, our girls grown up, we altogether, with my brother, shall introduce a marked change in society. It will be a work of time, but it shall be done."

"No doubt, dear Ellinor."

"Asheton Court will of course be the arena on which the first phases of it shall appear, diffusing all around brilliant rays of genius, which will attract the wise and noble of other countries besides our own. During my father's and mother's lifetime, I can expect to do little; they are wedded to the customs of their father and mother, without apparently the least ambition to improve them. Ah! we are at home; how quickly time flies when absorbed in intellectual conversation; our drive of four miles has appeared to me but one."

"Most true, dear Ellinor."

"A purpose messenger from Asheton Court," exclaimed Mrs. Trevor, the butler officiously handing her the important missive, as she stepped out of the carriage; "lights immediately."

It might have occurred to the anxious daughter of a barbarian to say to the servant, "No bad news, I trust." Not so to Mrs. Trevor; of what use was the letter, if she was to learn the news of it from a servant?

Preparing herself for any event, she assumed the countenance proper for some shock; but as she read, the news was too pain-

ful to be endured in any other manner than genuinely. She did not say she could have borne to read of the sudden death of either father or mother better, but it was perfectly plain to any one who might choose to interpret her countenance, that Godfrey's intended marriage was a much more bitter blow.

Pale and aghast, she threw the letter from her, exclaiming, "We must stop it." Then instantly snatching it up again, "Too late, too late," she muttered in real anguish.

For the first time in his life, an idea rose to Mr. Trevor's mind, the effort of but a few seconds.

"She must be going mad."

However, he had not courage to enunciate it.

Mrs. Trevor's night was very much the reverse of her pleasant day. Her reflections were all the more bitter, because she felt herself powerless. The common everyday cunning of a small mind instinctively told her it was her next policy to be "delighted" with news that gave her, for the first time in her life, the experience of real grief.

She absolutely wept, to Mr. Trevor's manifest horror and alarm; such instances of weakness being almost unknown in his adored and talented Ellinor.

Many people have a knack of talking away their anger or disappointment. But words only fed hers, and she arose in the morning even more irritated than she went to bed at night. Yet the messenger was waiting to go.

"Shall I send to say you are ill, my loved one," murmured Mr. Trevor, becoming quite inspired by the urgency of the case.

"No, no; it is necessary that I should send them my opinion. My brother, of course, will be anxious for my approbation. I may, perhaps, be able to put in a little word, a remonstrance by which we can delay matters for a time, until we are certain that this young lady is fitted to be Godfrey's wife. I have not seen her yet, you know; and I cannot but feel astonished that my brother should have gone so far, without previously sending for me—we think so exactly alike."

"Most true, dear Ellinor."

"He certainly says something about his intentions having been precipitated by unwonted events; but as for Mr. and Mrs. Asheton, they appear to me to have utterly forgotten everything due to themselves or their son."

"Ah, indeed, my love."

"Do you not perceive how much more they say of the young

lady than my brother? I know he wishes for me. I think 'twould be as well if I went, instead of wrote, Trevor?"

"Better, far better, my excellent Ellinor."

"And yet I shall feel too much."

"Far, far too much, my poor Ellinor."

"Then leave me for a time. I require total solitude to write the sort of letter that ought to gain influence in such a matter."

Ordinary mortals would have thought the missive thus composed remarkably ill-judged, not to say impertinent. But it was larded with so many protestations of the "deepest love," the "anxious fears," the "more than ordinary solicitude necessary for the marrying of an Asheton—and such an Asheton"—with other truly monstrous "sops" of family conceit and exclusiveness, that none of the three readers of it found any fault with it. There was one little hit in it, regarding "her brother deigning to look upon a Flower, and that she trusted early measures would be taken to remind the rest of that marvellously lucky family they were not to presume to encroach because of the fortune Fate had showered on one," which just nettled Mr. Asheton in the slightest degree. However, he speedily consoled himself, and excused her, by saying,—

"But, indeed, poor Ellinor, she has not yet seen our May Flower."



CHAPTER XII.

NOTWITHSTANDING MORE "NOES," ALL ENDS IN AN "AY."

SIR ROBERT FANE came in to dress for a seven o'clock dinner, hot and tired with a day's shooting on the moors. He was disposed—very rare for him—to be in a bad humour, and was not put into a better one by finding his toilette-table in a state of utter confusion.

It evidently arose from no fault of his valet, for it appeared as if imps of mischief had been at work. All the brushes were in every place but the right one, and all daubed with some odious compound. The scent bottles were upset, and their contents evaporating all over the table. The combs were *non est*, the soap in his boots, and his slippers under the grate.

"Confound that young imp, this is too much of a good thing. I'll have him punished."

And he strode into his wife's boudoir with a step uncommon to him.

A fair-haired, pretty boy, with sharp mischievous eyes, shrunk instinctively within the voluminous folds of his mother's dress, as the angry father appeared.

Ere Sir Robert could say a word, Lady Fane exclaimed, in a most animated voice for her :—

"Oh, Robert, I am so delighted to see you! Such charming news! I thought of sending an express messenger to meet and tell you, but I wished so much to see your surprise and delight. Our dear Godfrey is going to marry a very pretty little charming girl—a Miss Flower."

"The devil!" exclaimed Sir Robert, and had just sufficient presence of mind left to bolt out of the room. There we had better leave him for the present, and meet him again at dinner.

By this time, as became a man of the world whose fortunes fluctuate between morning and evening, he was quite composed, and enabled to tell Master Fane, with the courtesy of a polite father, that if he caught him in his dressing-room again, he should think it necessary to make him acquainted with the merits of a horse-whip.

"Why, what has the poor child done?" asked his mother.

Sir Robert gave a *historiette* of his toilette sufferings during the process of dressing.

"You know he has so little to amuse him," pleaded Lady Fane.

"Then allow him to take us in turns, my dear Cecilia. You can arrange your mother's toilette to-morrow, my boy."

"Was it this trifling annoyance, my dear Sir Robert, that made you use that extraordinary word?" asked his lady.

"A word—pray what word?"

But being unable to pronounce it, and their guests entering, no more was said.

A good dinner softens down a multitude of woes. Generous wines disperse the vapours of ill-temper, as the sun drinks up mists. By the time dinner was over, Sir Robert was nearly himself; before he went into coffee, he was perfectly resigned, and had even succeeded among his guests in making a very good book, upon the chance of Mr. Godfrey Asheton having no second son.

At all events he had three more years' certain enjoyment of

the Rollinston Estates; and he had that opinion of the softness (query, greenness) of Mr. Godfrey Asheton's nature, as to build some hopes upon a small allowance, perhaps a thousand a-year, being accorded to Lady Fane, as compensation for deposing her from the position of an heiress; therefore among all the congratulatory letters that poured in upon Mr. Godfrey Asheton, none pleased them so much as Sir Robert's. There was a frankness, a heartiness, quite delightful in it, and not a single allusion to what might be a very serious loss to him. He was a proof among many, how true was the maxim of the "Inspired Book"—"The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light."

He knew the Asheton family were generous in the largest sense of the word, and he took the best means in his power to command their affection and sympathy. Thus we see Sir Robert resigned himself to his fate without a struggle. Mrs. Trevor made a few feeble remonstrances that all died of weakness; Miss Beatrice Flower failed altogether.

Fate decided that a purpose of marriage should be fulfilled between Godfrey Asheton and Marion Flower, and was galloping rapidly towards fulfilment of it.

In "union is strength." It is hardly possible to tell if, at this early period, any idea entered into the head of Beatrice to make use of the peculiar sins of the respective parties now about to be joined together in holy matrimony, with the amiable purpose of eventually procuring a divorce between them, according to the various modes now allowed by Parliament.

Or if, at the same time, Mrs. Trevor vowed to herself she would make the new Mrs. Asheton understand that she was "the clever one" of the family; and if she would not permit her, as her due, to rule pre-eminent still at Asheton Court, war would be declared between them, and then of course Mrs. Godfrey would have to succumb.

Or, that Sir Robert might say to himself, "These Ashetons are as peculiar as somebody down below. There can be no harm in my taking any little advantage of such whims, it being no fault of mine, their indulging in them."

Philosophers teach us that illimitable space is filled with invisible matter, divided into infinitesimal fractions, which remain floating in ambient atmosphere, until meeting with the corresponding particle destined for such purpose, they are instantly called into life, and fulfil the purpose for which they were created.

As with matter, so it may be with mind. Various ideas, countless thoughts, and ever-changing feelings fill the human brain with endless particles. These rise and die daily. But if they meet with a corresponding particle in another mind, so far from dying, they spring into active life, and become the actions by which human beings are governed. It remains to be seen if these thoughts, inimical to the happiness of the intended bride and bridegroom, rising in three different brains, and innocuous while floating singly, ever met, and became, in consequence of union and sympathy, a living and acting principle.

But we have not married them yet.

Godfrey found (as who has not?) that the amber-tinted days of courtship were now and then rather clouded. Marion did not appear, on the whole, so entirely happy and delighted with her high fortune as he could have wished.

Her gay sweet laughter was no longer heard. Her clear eyes had that indescribable touch of sadness in them, that a young girl might be excused feeling when she changes a life or unconcerned maidenhood for that of wifedom.

She was nervous and timid. She had tears in her eyes when they spoke of Julian and his hapless state, and altogether she was thinking less of being allied to the Ashetons than she ought to have done.

But her demeanour was nothing in comparison to the annoyance occasioned by Mrs. Flower. That good lady, in the warmth of her large heart, took in the whole family of Asheton Court at once. They were all "dears" and "darlings." She confided to them all her family concerns, and was caught running all over Asheton like a tame cat. She had been heard in the village to talk of "my nephew Godfrey," and was in every respect rendering herself peculiarly obnoxious, without being in the least aware of it.

The state of Count Julian bordered so decidedly upon the ridiculous whims and caprices of a spoilt school-boy, that few gave him credit for real feeling; yet it was so only he had no more manly mode of expressing it. One of his relations had been sent for, and he was removed before the preparations for the marriage became very marked. Beatrice had at one time an inclination to accompany them to her Italian home; but that peculiar state of a diseased mind, morbidness, induced her to remain until the deed was really done. Even going so far as to assist at it, in the shape of one of the bridesmaids. She might have had some sort of idea that a loophole would occur,

of which she would take immediate advantage. Besides, it was not so much her heart that was hurt, as her ambition and vanity. Had she been in love with Mr. Asheton, she must have fled like the count, but being enamoured of Asheton Court, she was fully able to remain, with all her senses on the alert, and seize upon any forlorn hope Fate might be tempted to hold out to her.

A most "forlorn hope," she allowed, but until they were married, she must indulge this hope; afterwards, she would content herself with hating the unconscious Marion, and doing her all the mischief she was able, by way of reprisals. Mrs. Trevor having taken a week to soften down any little asperities, was now at Asheton Court, high priestess of everything. To say that she was struck with Marion's prettiness and grace, expresses very little. She acknowledged at once, though only to herself, that Godfrey's "infatuation" (as she was pleased to call a most measured and dispassionate love) was reasonable, while her father and mother also were excused being a little *tête montée*. But the feeling of admiration brought with it no corresponding efforts at sisterly affection. On the contrary, as she felt glad and self-laudatory that such singular beauty should belong to the Ashetons, so did she experience the necessity of keeping down (what barbarians call "snubbing") the possessor of such influential powers. She meant to love her as a sister, only if she proved meek, quiet, and capable of ruling her actions solely to the nod of Mrs. Trevor's "clever" head.

Marion was awed by her intended sister-in-law's manner, though grateful for the patronizing attention she paid her. According to her usual habit, she made the best of everything, and Prissy backed her up, in admiration of Mrs. Trevor's sense and cleverness. For it had been coeval with Prissy's knowledge of A B C, an awe of, and deference for, that superior lady.

"Lady Fane's the prettiest, you know, May, but, my goodness, Mrs. Trevor's beyond everything. In fact, I don't know what she isn't. And if she is pleased with you—and she wouldn't be a sensible woman if she wasn't—then, May, there's no more to be said."

Gathering as much comfort as she could out of Prissy's somewhat vague opinions, Marion prepared for her marriage with feelings utterly undefinable to the Ashetons themselves.

The vicissitudes of her young life, the small experience she had had of the quiet monotony of home duties, the prompt energy that was often needed to save life itself, the never-ending changes and fears of those connected with an army in active

service, had given Marion a faith and trust in One alone, that became as necessary to her as the air she breathed.

It was with the most profound feelings of love and hope that she besought the only "Father" she now possessed to fit her for the new station in which she was about to enter. The very simplicity of her nature made her the more earnest in prayer. As she hoped much, she loved more; the enthusiasm which lay concealed under so much elasticity of youth and spirits imparted for the time being an elevation of heart and soul that almost appeared to keep her at the footstool of the Almighty. And at a time when other girls would have had no eyes but for their lover, no thoughts but about their *trousseaux*, or, at best, but a wonderful mixture of all sorts of feelings connected with this most important period, our innocent little half-educated Marion sat hour by hour in the natural throne, canopied by the beetling crag, beseeching God's blessing on her endeavours to be a good and loving wife.

Let whoever among her own or intended relations that cavilled at, or complained of, her apathy and indifference to happiness and joy beyond the usual lot of brides, all was forgotten as, attended by Beatrice, the faithful Prissy, and the two little white Miss Trevors, all as bridesmaids, with a limited number of relations, Marion gave her hand to Godfrey Asheton, with the earnestness, the devotion, and the love of the angels she so much resembled.



CHAPTER XIII.

TREATS HOW RUMOUR CAN CHANGE A FAIR BRIDE INTO A BLACK WOMAN.

To the world at large, and their neighbourhood in particular, the Ashetons were not rated so high in value as their own estimation of themselves warranted. They were good for a certain number of dull entertainments, which everyone voted as nuisances, yet to which everyone scrupulously went, as the only outward mark that the Ashetons gave of an affinity with barbarians. They were acknowledged to be sufficiently high

principled never to ask anyone to dinner without giving him an excellent one, immaculately dressed and served. Also once a year they gave a ball, which was not so highly regarded, as, taking high example, they would close this ball just as fast young ladies and dancing-mad officers considered "the fun" to begin. Very decorous balls they were, though the best champagne flowed freely. But the very fact of being inspirited by such a renovator (rather unusual at balls, where hot rooms and unbearable thirst will make dancers swallow anything) made it the harder to be so summarily dismissed.

Thus, their balls did not add much to their popularity. According to the measure of their neighbourly qualities, they performed some of their duties well, but might do them a great deal better. A faint show of rising popularity, and desire to make much of them, attended the coming out of the Miss Ashetons, with that eligible "parti," their only brother, in the background. But if the old Ashetons had been reserved and proud, the young ones were doubly so. The early marriage of the only sweet tempered one, Lady Fane, the disdainful bearing of Miss Ellinor, and the hauteur and exclusiveness of the young heir, banished them all back to the land of Tabooism—a land they had hedged in themselves.

The mothers of England bear a somewhat indifferent character as regards the pertinacity with which they first hunt up, and then hunt down, an elder son. But they are much maligned. In fact, we have already shown that Mr. Godfrey Asheton was quite at a loss where to look for a wife. And it may fairly be inferred that the matrons belonging to his country were unanimously averse to bestowing their dear, merry girls upon a man who had the look of a Lucifer, or, in other words, went about the world as if remarkably displeased with everything within it.

Thus, while the rest of the county feasted, laughed, talked, married, and quarrelled together, the Ashetons not only held aloof, but were kept aloof, and could not be said to have advanced one step towards sociability and intercourse with any of their neighbours for the last fifty years.

They were apparently forgotten until their turn for dinner-giving came. Mr. Godfrey Asheton was as a thing of nought, because he held himself invulnerable.

But when it began to be bruited around that Mr. Godfrey Asheton was going to be married, an electric shock ran through the county. To whom?—who was she?—a lady in her own right?—a young dowager duchess?—a German princess?—or

some little unearthly being out of a star created on purpose for him?

Before it could be settled—all had been kept so quiet—the deed was done, he was married. The demand for the county newspaper was so great, to see if it was really true, that the first edition sold off in half an hour, and more than one carriage was seen patiently waiting at the office-door for the first impression of the second edition.

And yet how disappointingly meagre was the news!—

“On the 6th of November, by the Rev. Constantine Flower, Godfrey Asheton, only son of Rupert Asheton, Esq., of Asheton Court, to Marion, second daughter of the late Colonel Flower, A.D.C. to General Aubrey, E.I.C. Artillery.”

“The idea,” remarked one young lady, “of one of those proud Ashetons being married, and only by one clergyman. I thought they would be assisted by two or three at the least.”

“Nay,” said another, “to think, after all his airs, he has only married a plain Miss, and she seems to have belonged to some Colonel in an Indian Regiment, perhaps the daughter of a black woman.”

“Ah! that’s just it,” answered the other; “she probably is the offspring of some Begum, or native princess, whom those stupid Ashetons, knowing no better, think of high rank. I hope mamma will go and call; I am dying of curiosity.”

“So am I; the more so as I always thought that Italian girl meant to have him. Why, I gave him up on her account; not only because she was so much handsomer than I am, but had so many favourable advantages to prosecute her claims.”

“Ha, ha, well—she seems foiled as much as yourself. It would be rather good fun to ride over there to-day, as if we knew nothing about the matter. We can pump it all out of the young one, she is so immensely innocent.”

“Do; I have been wanting a breath of sea-air for some time.”

They acted accordingly, took their canter on the sands, and then drew up at the Wood-head, ostensibly to ask for a biscuit and glass of wine.

Mrs. Flower was emerging, boots laced, shawled, and bonneted, out of the door, with a purpose of “doing” the parish, when they reined up.

“Nothing was so fortunate as her not having started.”

“Nothing would distress them so much if she did not start.”

Thus they banded civilities, perfectly sincere on good Mrs. Flower’s side, and indeed equally sincere on theirs, for to be

closeted with Mrs. Flower, and have their justifiable efforts at information smothered in parish details was more than they could endure.

"The Miss Flowers are at home, surely."

"Oh, yes; both my daughters are, I believe."

"Then they will take care of us."

And with many regrets on Mrs. Flower's part, with assurances that she would remain if they wished it, she departed. Prissy only was in the room when they entered, and as they asked for biscuits and sherry, rung for that and no more, for she always said what she thought, and supposed every one did the same.

Beatrice, meeting the servant, ordered luncheon instead; but it did not seem that this civility on her part benefited the two young ladies, regarding their thirst for knowledge more than Prissy's milder order of biscuits and sherry. At last, as if suddenly smitten by the lightening up of an idea, Prissy said,—

"Oh! the cake;—they must have some cake, you know, Beatrice"

"I have ordered luncheon," answered Beatrice, coldly.

"Oh," said Prissy, shut up.

"Cake—what cake?" asked No. 1 young lady.

"The bride cake, of course," returned Prissy, with alacrity.

"A bride cake! Really—who has been married?"

"Our Marion."

"I beg your pardon, I have not the honour of knowing your Marion."

"Our cousin Marion."

"And whom did she marry?"

"Oh, Mr. Godfrey Ashton. He is a much nicer person than people think."

"Priscilla, go and see if luncheon is ready," said her sister, whose delicate cheek became flushed like the sunny side of a peach."

"Yes, that I will," said the obedient Prissy.

"You know, of course, by the papers, of my cousin's marriage," said Beatrice haughtily, and with an air as much as to say, Ask no more questions. "Mr. Asheton is not likely to marry without all the world knowing it. Do you like the new opera-house?"

Half an hour after this, having had their luncheon, tasted the cake, ordered their horses, mounted, and set off home, the two young ladies reckoned up their budget of news.

No. 1. "I could extract nothing further from that Italian

girl. I wonder if she is disappointed—she put me in mind of a summer's day, with a heavy thunder-cloud overhead, ready to burst upon one at a minute's notice."

No. 2. "Neither could I make much out of the other. I suspect she is very deep."

(Dear innocent Prissy, whose spring was so shallow, she was pumped out in a minute.)

"I asked her if she liked her cousin's marriage, and she said, 'Oh! of course, far better than the other one.' When I said I knew nothing about the other one, she answered, 'No more you ought to—Marion will be very angry with me.' 'Marion, as you call her,' said I, 'must be a great beauty, handsomer than your sister.' 'Oh! there never was any one so handsome as Beatrice' (Prissy had early imbibed the idea, and never lost it); 'but Marion is such a darling.' 'Has she lived with you long?' 'Very nearly all the time she came from India.' 'Her mother was born in India, I suppose?' 'Oh, of course; but, indeed, I never asked.' 'A great lady?' 'No; I think she was a very little woman.' Now don't you see from these answers, Julia, that she intended purposely to mislead me."

No. 1. "I rather agree with you, Maria; little wretch, I should like to shake her!"

No. 2. "Evidently they have got hold of the poor young man, who, not used to the society of real gentlewomen, has been taken in by this fancied princess."

No. 1. "However, we know more than anyone, and shall have plenty to tell to-night."

No. 2. "Yes; let us canter on, that no one may be beforehand."

Thus the world of —shire became violently agitated with the startling news that Mr. Godfrey Asheton had married a black woman, because she was a princess. That Miss Beatrice Flower had been sacrificed, he having been positively engaged to her. That the princess had many lacs of rupees in a trunk, and was married in yellow satin, broided in pearls, with a chain of diamonds round her throat, rudely set, but of incalculable value, three yards long. And that the marriage was kept secret until the last moment, for fear there should be any public demonstration caused by the dusky hue of the lovely bride.

When people will hold themselves aloof from the rest of the world, they must be prepared to submit to any amount of stories circulated about them. And during the visits that were paid at

Asheton Court, in compliment to the interesting event, that indifference to the world's opinion, which characterised them, rather added to the mystery of the unknown bride, than simplified it. They would have been amazed had they been told one half of what the country said, losing all sense of the ridiculousness of the reports in the much greater presumption of anyone daring to dictate to an Asheton whom he was to marry.

Thus the winter passed away, and the excitement abated nothing, but rather increased. Parliament met, and people went to town, where they spread the news still further. Lent came, but no one appeared to think that, because you were enjoined to fast in one way, your tongue might not go all the faster in another.

Easter brought country people to their country homes for a brief holiday, during which they plucked violets, wore primrose-wreaths, and talked of the bore of returning to town, and the great mystery yet unfathomed.

But, no; rumour was satisfied, reality should give place to conjecture. On many tables lay the large, embossed, well-known Asheton invitation-card. So many for dinner one day, so many for another, the whole to wind up with a ball to all the country. Astonishing! The Ashetons could not be ashamed of the black princess; or, presuming upon their position, they intended to show they would not be ashamed of her. She would probably be made fair with pearls, or sparkling with diamonds. At all events, no one was so mad as to prefer their spring delights to this attempt at town gaiety. Fresh toilets were ordered from the London milliners; and, curious as the ladies had been, it yet was not unworthy of note to remark that, whenever two or the grey-headed, sage, political old gentlemen met together, they were sure to be heard saying, "Going to the Ashetons?" "Ah, of course, we must all go to see the black princess!"

CHAPTER XIV

HOW LITTLE IT TAKES TO PLEASE PEOPLE—WHEN THEY ARE IN THE
HUMOUR.

GODFREY and Marion were returning from their wedding tour, which, at that untoward season of the year, had, at their own wish, been confined to Welsh and English scenery.

"I have lived abroad," pleaded she, "until I long for England only."

"A great pity, my dear Godfrey," remarked Mrs. Trevor; "it shows such a want of refined and intellectual taste."

While all the rest of the family were occupied in the arrangements for the fitting introduction of their new relative into the Asheton world, old Mr. Asheton alone thought of nothing but his delight at the prospect of seeing his little "May Flower once more."

"I cannot help calling her so, little dear thing, though happily she is May Flower no longer."

"I do not at all understand my father's infatuation," again remarked Mrs. Trevor, who appeared to hear everything, whether it concerned her or not.

"Your father took a great fancy to her from the first. And Godfrey's wife must ever be an object of the deepest interest to him. I hardly ever, my dear Ellinor, experienced so many acceptances to our dinner parties. I followed the usual rule of asking one third more than our table will hold, to make up for any probable refusals."

"The two girls from the Wood-head must come in the evening, I presume, if we are two many."

Lady Fane and Sir Robert had not yet been introduced to their new sister. That delicacy of health, mentioned before, necessitated Lady Fane's confinement to one atmosphere during the winter, and Sir Robert was not sufficiently stoical to go and witness the deed that might deprive him of four thousand a year. So he had excused himself. But they were both expected in the evening of this day, when Marion, but three days returned, sat by her father-in-law's chair, relating to him the history of her travels. In all other parts of the house where

the bustle and confusion attendant upon the large party expected that evening.

"And my May Flower is now happy, certain that she is a worthy little wife to my Godfrey.

Marion smiled, as if she felt it might be so, yet dared not yet to say it."

"And are you pleased, dear, with your dresses?"

"How kind you have been, dear grandfather. I have heard of them—not seen them."

"Dear, dear, how was that? Don't you try such things on? I told Ellinor to be sure about that."

"Godfrey has seen them, and he was pleased."

"Well, well, I hope they are all right. You know, my love, we are very anxious you should look your very best to-night. I want my May Flower to please all the world."

"And she wishes to please Godfrey, and those who love him."

"True, my dear, very prettily said. But still, I must have you look nice, to do justice to Godfrey's taste. Now, there is your pretty cousin."

"Yes, she is beautiful. Why did not Godfrey choose her? I never saw anything like her—did you, grandfather."

"Not so handsome, certainly; but you look serious, dear little one."

"It is nothing; but I shall be glad when a year is over. By that time I shall know—shall feel—if I am likely to be all that Godfrey wishes."

"You are wrong, May Flower—very wrong—you ought to have no mistrust in Godfrey."

"I do not mistrust him—it is myself."

Ere Marion could say more, the door opened, and Mrs. Asheton entered, saying that Lady Fane had arrived, and wishes to know when she can see her father.

"Surely now—at once," exclaimed the old gentleman; "my children ought not to use ceremony with me."

But little mysterious ceremonies were the only Characteristic possessed by Lady Fane. She entered with a pretty rustle of importance, clasped her father rather theatrically round the neck, presenting her cheek to be kissed, then withdrew, as if to look at him. Finally, turning towards Marion, said, in a soft, sweet voice—

"My new sister."

Marion saw that she might obey the dictates of her tender heart towards Lady Fane, though she could not towards Mrs.

Trevor. Coming forward at once, she kissed with her healthy red lips the hectic cheek of Lady Fane, who instantly kissed her again, saying, "Dear little thing," but Marion had nearly fallen over something concealed in the folds of Lady Fane's dress. To her surprise, a little fair face, with a very old, wizard-like look, peeped out.

"My darling, speak to grandpapa."

Instantly the face disappeared, and the dress was violently agitated.

"Hush, then, hush—no one shall speak to you. Excuse him, dear father, he is so sadly shy."

"So are my little granddaughters; and yet you, my children, always ran to me in love."

"He is far from strong, father; his nerves are as delicate as his frame. Sir Robert is on his way. The carriage which you so kindly sent only held us, with Edward's and my maid, so he follows in a fly with the luggage. My new sister is somewhat pale, I think."

"No," said Mrs. Trevor, just entering, "she has a remarkably high colour. My dear sister, how are you?"

"Quite well, thank you, love."

"You don't look so. Indeed, you look very ill; you have not brought Edward, I see."

"Oh, yes; here he is, as usual, quite close to mamma."

"Dear me! still tied to your apron-strings—so big a boy! Edward, I am ashamed of you. But, Marion, you ought—you must go and dress; you have but an hour and a half to do so."

"I will go out first to get some violets for Lady Fane," answered Marion, glad to depart.

She divined, as she gathered her violets, that the sisters were very like other sisters, not always on the best of terms.

Marion's toilet would have proceeded very well, but for the constant interruption of either Mrs. Asheton or Mrs. Trevor,—they were so nervously anxious she should look well.

"Dear heart alive!" exclaimed Pinner, the maid, as she was ordered by Mrs. Trevor to undo a thick Grecian plait, just executed with the utmost care; "it will take me an hour to do it up again—you will never be dressed in time, ma'am."

"Lock the door, then, Pinner, and we will do my hair after our own fashion—there is a carriage driving up now."

Few people ever give a dinner-party that some *contre-temps* does not occur. With the Ashetons 'twas as well nothing worse

happened than that Marion, who was to have been dressed first, in order to be regularly introduced as each party arrived, appeared about the last.

Sir Robert Fane, notwithstanding she had such a momentous fiat upon his affairs, was but little interested in an introduction. It was enough that she might deprive him of four thousand a year. Were she as pretty as an angel, she would look ugly to him. He had heard the rumour about the black princess, and had contented himself with laughing at it without contradicting it. If he had taken the trouble of thinking about her at all, he imagined, from his idea of Godfrey's taste, that she was a tall sort of statue-like girl, with faultless features, a cold stony manner, and general freeziness of appearance.

He was rather surprised not to find her in the drawing-room; and sheltering within the ample folds of a window-curtain, he there occupied himself in his favourite amusement, namely, speculating upon the private characters of all the different parties ushered into the room, as they arrived—drawing inferences from their appearances, and the various modes in which they entered and paid their compliments. He considered it by no means unpleasant amusement, but rather savouring of his favourite game of chance, to calculate the future fate of those to whom he was introduced. Whether they ended ill or well did not so much concern him, as that he should be found right in his first judgment.

His amusement, however, appeared not likely to be great this evening, which we shall discover if we follow the flight of his thoughts.

"The old hum-drum lot—not a single new face, save those beardless noodles from the barracks. My fair sister-in-law, as usual, disturbing everyone, and most properly indignant with Mrs. Flower for taking the seat meant, of course, for the duchess. She will succeed in dislodging her; pray Heaven she comes not my way. Ha! my dear wife, and of course that little imp of mischief (Sir Robert's bump of philoprogenitiveness was small), who ought to be in bed. Miss Flower is looking my way, and appears handsomer than ever. I'll beckon her over here, and for lack of other amusement, gaze into her lustrous eyes. How Godfrey could withstand placing so beautiful a creature at the top of his table, I know not."

Then aloud, "Thank you, Miss Flower; I assure you I was so dull, until I caught a glimpse of you. I was driven to bet my right hand against my left, as to what old friend would appear

next. They don't seem to me ever to have any new people to dinner here."

"No; it is against Asheton rules, to make new acquaintances."

"But where is the bride? I am all anxiety to see her."

"I presume she is making a very elaborate toilette; and it is your own fault you have not seen her before."

"True; but does she require much dressing up?"

"Rather, to make her look like a great lady, for she is a mere girl."

Here, a particle of thought floating about in the brain of Sir Robert, hit an idea running in the head of Beatrice, and gave birth at once to an active principle, of which at present neither knew or felt the existence.

"I always hoped you would be the chief ornament of this house, Miss Flower. It requires a strong attraction, both mentally and physically, to redeem it from intolerable dulness."

A gleam of sudden anger shot from Miss Flower's dark eyes, which rewarded Sir Robert for his speech, revealing to him what he had strongly suspected.

"I have always understood," answered she, bitterly, "that Sir Robert Fane had too deep an interest another way, to wish to see anyone in the position he so courteously assigns me."

"Pardon me, when one's fate is so inevitable, grant a poor wretch a faint hope of making the best of it. You were an old friend. I have heard nothing of this bride."

"Doubtless, when you see her, you will follow the world."

"Is she so lovely, then?"

"No woman can be a judge of what a man admires. A pretty girlish face sets one of your sex raving, so that he cannot see what species of innocent may be behind it."

"It will be happier for your cousin if she is such as you lead me to infer; she will suffer less in running counter——"

"Yes, Sir Robert; you pause——"

He still remained silent; and on looking up, she saw his eyes absorbed in watching the entrance of some fresh arrivals.

"Say, who is that but now entered—a vision in white? Hush! what a silence! You need not tell me; I see it is your cousin."

"What a preposterous dress for a dinner-party," murmured Beatrice.

It was of white silk, glistening with silver threads; a few leaves of silver lay on her hair, rippled in dark and light shades, and from these leaves fell long waving grass, half green, half

silver. She was a little flushed, and this background of green and white had a beautiful effect. A single row of pearls round her throat gave a regal air to it; and, beyond her blushing cheek, there was nothing of shyness about her. She was as self-possessed as if indeed a queen.

Not having heard the buzz of universal small talk that pervaded ere they entered the room, she leant lightly on Godfrey's arm, quite unaware of the sudden and entire silence that followed their appearance. Godfrey had expressed himself as satisfied with her dress and looks—and both being unenlightened regarding the black princess, they were, of course, unable to judge of the effect her *entrée* occasioned.

She went through her various introductions with that simplicity which gives both ease and grace, and before she arrived at Sir Robert—on whom, secretly, Godfrey wished her to make a good impression—he had been able to speculate upon her character, and back his right hand against the left as to her future.

Miss Flower was right in her saying that most men are more struck with simplicity and innocency of expression than with beauty. And though Marion looked lovely, the charm of her ingenuous countenance and manner won Sir Robert's admiration at once. Indeed, he was so absorbed watching her, that Miss Flower's remarks were unheeded.

"Lucky dog, Godfrey," was his inward thought. "Why is it that Fortune is so bountiful in her favours to some, and such a sorry jade to others? This girl appears created on purpose for him; for not even an Asheton can cavil at her face or manners. Yet, she must have some fault, some blemish. She is not weak in character—her chin is too well defined; her eyes too clear, too frank to be afraid of any one. Should she run counter—Ha! she will kiss that round-faced cousin of hers, and talk to her aunt; he chafes, and she does not see it. She will do what she considers right, let Asheton will rise like mountains in her path. Poor girl, she has that rare thing, a fine heart; will it become ossified by Asheton pride? I can only judge of women as they do of race-horses, and I'll back my right hand against my left for a thousand guineas she turns restive, and either conquers or dies. I beg your pardon, Miss Flower, but I, as well as the rest of this august company, am amazed at the fair vision of Mrs. Godfrey Asheton. I was credibly informed that she was the daughter of a dark and woolly-headed princess of Oude. Allow for a poor man being so suddenly undeceived."

"I can allow for some, but not for Sir Robert Fane, whom I considered too much a man of the world to be surprised at anything."

"Do you see how expressive her countenance is? I can read her thoughts at once."

"Yes; there is no difficulty in diving to the bottom of her character; you can understand it all in five minutes."

Meantime Prissy, who was beaming with delight at Marion's looking so pretty, was undergoing a cross-questioning from Nos. 1 and 2 young ladies, who had originally been the spreaders of those reports about the bride that were now so abruptly contradicted.

"Miss Flower, I thought you told us that Mrs. Godfrey Asheton's mother was an Indian princess."

"Me!—me say that! No, that I didn't. Why its no such thing; so how could I say it?"

No. 2. "We certainly inferred from you that she was born in India."

Prissy. "Well! that doesn't make her an Indian princess any how. She was a Miss Aubrey."

No. 1. "You did not tell us how lovely she is."

Prissy. "Well! because she looks so well to-night—I never saw her look better; and besides, I don't care much about beauty. I like nice people."

No. 2. "You see every one is much astonished. They all thought Mrs. Godfrey Asheton was a very dark—would be almost a black woman."

Prissy (aghast). "My goodness! what a shame. I wonder what Mr. Asheton would say?"

No. 1. "Pray don't mention this idea now, it will do no good; only tell me, is she likely to be nice and good tempered?"

Prissy (angry). "Goodness gracious! now that's a greater shame. Of course, there never was any one so nice and good tempered."

CHAPTER XV

AND HOW DIFFICULT IT IS WHEN THEY ARE NOT.

ALL the fêtes passed off remarkably well, and the introduction of Mrs. Godfrey Asheton to the world was *un fait accompli*.

Marion conducted herself admirably, that is, she was natural, and people forgave her for not being black. For they were disappointed. It is so pleasant to have something to say against those who think themselves superior to the rest of the world; and the introduction of a black woman (princess or not) into so exclusive a family, was a charming handle against them.

As the tide turned, it appeared likely to flow in the full flood of praise towards the bride, for, young as she was, the dawnings of different feelings from those of the Ashetons showed themselves in her.

And though she might not be able to effect much, during the life-time of the old people, great things would be expected of her afterwards, judging by her sweet countenance.

Sir Robert, upon further acquaintance, was rather inclined to hedge his bet, for the sake of his right hand, and compromise for five hundred guineas, instead of a thousand. For her total want of education, her submissive gentleness, made that expressive chin of no effect. She might have strength of character, but the odds now were, whether she would discover her own powers or not. Yet he liked her very much, spite of the injury she had done him in marrying Godfrey Asheton—liked her sufficiently to have no engagement with either the duke or earl for full ten days. He was a great admirer of pretty women, but as yet they had principally been of the handsome, stylish sort, who could bandy a few witticisms with him, rather at the expense of his good opinion of them.

But Marion's unaffected, not to say artless, conversation was new to him.

And in this world what charms like novelty? Lady Fane pronounced her "delightful—the dearest little thing in the world." And Master Fane seemed to think his parents' example worthy of imitation, for he had, on more than one occa-

sion, emerged voluntarily from the folds of his mother's dress, to listen to Marion's tales of foreign birds and flowers, rewarding her for this effort at amusing him by various little tokens of his approbation, pulling out the comb that fastened up her long curls, stealing her gloves, and tying her handkerchief into knots. All of which undesirable marks of affection were pronounced by his mother as "delightful traits in her darling."

Mrs. Trevor found reason to think that her first idea of Marion's unfitness to be made into an Asheton would be discovered as another positive proof of her superior forethought and wisdom. She did not improve in the estimation of her sister-in-law as the days went by.

Beginning with an early determination never to like the person who should stand between her and the coveted name and position she was so truly fitted for, she was further inclined to be indignant at the high place she had gained in the love of old Mr. Asheton.

"He was positively infatuated by her," as she remarked to her mother, "who, she was glad to perceive, was not run away with by merely the prettiness of a face."

In addition, having always deemed it her duty to dictate to and look down upon her eldest sister, to prevent her, as an heiress, from being thoroughly spoilt, the knowledge that she highly approved of young Mrs. Asheton, had kissed and greeted her as a sister ("which," again remarked Mrs. Trevor, "I intend to do, when she has proved herself worthy to be so"), was enough of itself to point out to Mrs. Trevor how she must act. "Cecilia, having forgotten what was due to herself as well as her brother, should be able to take Mrs. Trevor as her example, in whose character she would find nothing weak or injudicious."

For a little time these feelings smothered in Mrs. Trevor's bosom for want of a fitting *confidante*, but an accidental speech of Sir Robert's, regarding Miss Beatrice Flower's not having that cousinly regard for Mrs. Godfrey Asheton that her half-sister possessed, supplied her with this necessary article.

"I have a great opinion of Beatrice, my dear Robert; you may be sure she has good reason for withholding her regard."

"Very good, indeed," answered Sir Robert, drily; "she had decided to be Mrs. Godfrey Asheton herself."

"Not at all; I know, and who can know better, that no such thought ever entered her head. In fact, she said to me in confidence, more than once, she never could think of even the presumption of accepting Godfrey."

"Humph! that looks very like as if such a thought had entered her head very often."

"Very, very much the reverse, Robert; she knew, she felt that it must be an unequal, if not an unhappy match, that united an Asheton to the Flower family. But I shall make it my business to discover upon what grounds she places her indifferent opinion of her cousin. It will be my duty to discover what her faults are, that at all events one member of the family (not infatuated) may be prepared to cope with, and eradicate them if possible."

"Pray do, and let me know what they are; at present, I acknowledge that whenever I look into her face, I quite forget the injury she is likely to do me."

"So like men, at least some men; fortunately Trevor is of precisely the same opinion that I am; her beauty is nothing to that of Beatrice."

"True, fair sister, true; yet there is something of the kingdom above in the blue eyes of the one, and a good deal of the world below in the dark orbs of the other. They rather remind me, sitting side by side, of the impersonification of the good and bad angels that attend at our birth; and faith, I don't so much wonder we unhappy mortals are so often drawn astray. One cannot think one is going to perdition in the company of a being beautiful as Beatrice."

"Pray, Sir Robert, remember to whom you are speaking, and of whom—a particular friend of mine. I am unable to comprehend to what your remarks allude."

"Then oblige me by not attempting, my dear Ellinor; it is not at all worth your while."

"It is worth everyone's while to gain information."

"Then you will find the full explanation of my remarks in a book of eastern fables. At present, farewell."

Mrs. Trevor "talked over" Mrs. Godfrey Asheton with her cousin Beatrice to her heart's content, and was amazingly alarmed when she discovered that she knew not a word of French, was ignorant of Italian, and incapable of playing one bar of music.

"Good heavens!—oh, good heavens! And of course, my brother is ignorant of this terrible fact?"

"Not at all. I took the earliest opportunity of informing him, not only of that, but that she had been, the whole of her life, brought up in barracks."

"Gracious heavens! and if the world should ever discover this?"

"I think it is pretty well known already. Marion, I know, never denies it; in fact, tells it without reserve or confusion."

"A proof—a positive proof of her neglected education. My dear Beatrice, why did you not write to warn me?"

"My dear madam, how could I conceive that your brother, so singularly sensitive, would think of her for a moment? But I imagine he was led into making an offer sooner than he intended, that is, if he intended making her one at all, by the conduct of my cousin Julian."

Here Miss Beatrice gave a highly coloured narrative of the whole of that interesting affair, not disguising that she was the original cause of his being sent for, with the praiseworthy object of removing Marion entirely from the notice of Mr. Asheton.

"Oh, my dear Beatrice, why—why did you not insist upon her marrying Count Julian? We should then have been spared this disgrace."

Even Beatrice winced at this remark, and her cheek coloured high; but people who take evil spirits into their bosoms, are compelled to swallow nauseous morsels now and then, so she gulped it down, and answered calmly.

"I did everything. I urged Julian to propose again and again. I persuaded him it was nothing but silly girlism, so conspicuous in Marion. In fact, I have ruined his happiness for ever, I fear, and did no good towards effecting the separation—perhaps, indeed, hastening it."

"Do you mean to say that the Count di Romanio still loves her?"

"To so violent a degree, they fear his reason is materially injured. He cannot be trusted anywhere alone; in fact, I will acknowledge to you, he is in the hands and care of a keeper for the insane."

"Good heavens! and she so heartless! But does she know all this?"

"Of course; I have told her everything; and, I must do her the justice to say, she feels it deeply. I can make her unhappy for the day, if I mention his name."

"Really! Now I consider that remarkably strange in her; I hardly think it quite right she should feel so much, being Mrs. Godfrey Asheton."

"She is very childish, you know; all her feelings are spontaneous."

"Do you think she repents having reduced him to this state?"

"I suppose so."

Here a little mad particle in Mrs. Trevor's brain came in contact with a very wicked one in that of Beatrice; both started into life and took root.

CHAPTER XVI.

RELATES HOW MR. TREVOR, HITHERTO MERELY AN APPENDAGE OF MRS. TREVOR'S, CAUSES A DOMESTIC EARTHQUAKE.

It was out of all reason to suppose that Mrs. Trevor was capable of keeping her tongue silent upon such an important matter as Marion's deficient education.

She rather feared attacking her father; but, apparently unconscious that very few barbarians would have resorted to the littleness that she, an Asheton Trevor, was indulging, conceived it to be an admirable stroke of policy to question Marion of her former life, before her father-in-law.

Mrs. Trevor. "Marion, have you read this last little work, sent to me by a friend for my approbation, before it is given to the world?"

Mr. Asheton. "How could my little May see it, then, my dear Ellinor?"

Mrs. Trevor. "I brought it here, my dear father, with me, and I thought that naturally the title would excite her curiosity—'France et Angleterre, Etude Sociale et Politique'—a matter of such vital importance."

Mr. Asheton. "Of no use to May Flower; she does not understand French."

Mrs. Trevor. "Then you know it, my dear father. What is to be done?"

Marion. "Godfrey intends becoming my tutor. I shall learn; ah! with more quickness than any other girl, I know, taught by such a master."

Mrs. Trevor. "I beg your pardon, French is not to be learned grammatically and profoundly, except from the nursery. How

long did our French governess remain with us, my dear father?"

Mr. Asheton. "Many years, my child; perhaps ten."

Mrs. Trevor. "There, you hear; and except that I have made a point of continuing my education, ever since I had a daughter, and thus may be an exception to the general rule, I am persuaded that Cecilia, as well as most other girls, after ten years incessant study, know it only superficially."

Mr. Asheton. "Very sad for you, my little May; but I know you will be very apt. My dear Cecilia was the sweetest tempered child, I know, but she had not your quickness, my Ellinor."

Mrs. Trevor. "I class her among the generality, my dear father. And though Marion, under Godfrey's tuition, may, in a manner, learn French sufficiently to deceive others less fortunate than myself, I fear it will never do away with the sad effect of her having lived and been brought up in—barracks!"

Mr. Asheton (startled). "My dear!"

Marion. "My mother always accompanied her father and mother, and afterwards her husband, and they were with their regiments almost entirely."

Mrs. Trevor. "But *we* never saw your mother."

Marion. "Ah, if any of you had seen my mother, no one would have thought of me. I never saw anyone so fair—never knew anyone so good."

Mrs. Trevor. "It is right a daughter should think well of her mother."

Marion (indignantly). "Think well of my mother! People did not stay at thinking well of her! She was idolised. The Commander-in-chief had hot tears running down his face, when they told him that he had lost two officers he loved so well—General and Colonel Flower—found side by side on that terrible battle-field. But he shut himself up when he knew that the good angel of the regiment was gone; and all men mourned her as if they had lost the dearest thing on earth to them—and so she was."

Mrs. Trevor was, figuratively speaking, "shut up." Astonished at Marion's excitement, amazed that a person bred and born in a regiment should be mourned as only Ashetons ought to be, vanquished as regarded any knowledge of what a regimental life really was, she remained silent.

Mr. Asheton (tenderly, with his hand upon her drooping head). "My poor May Flower."

Marion. "But God is good to her, not only in giving her another grandfather, a Godfrey, a home like this; but—but—I shall see them all again—we shall meet to part no more."

Mrs. Trevor could as little understand the feelings that imparted such a glow to Marion's countenance, as the indignation she had shown before. Nothing but a vague species of insignificance filled her mind—a most unusual sensation for her, and so uncomfortable that she was the more inclined to dislike Marion than ever. "A little foolish enthusiast," thought she, "with a perfectly unregulated mind. Poor, poor Godfrey; but he will find me ever the same." She quietly left the room, and meeting Sir Robert, thought proper to inform him of Miss Flower's account of her cousin's education.

"Knows nothing! Then I would advise you to waste no more money on the education of your daughters. Brought up in barracks! You had better get Trevor into a militia regiment, and try what it is like."

Her mother listened with due attention to the remarks of her favourite daughter, and agreed with her upon the whole; but knowing the fact already, she had so far got over any distress she might have upon the subject, that Mrs. Trevor was more inclined to mourn over her composure than any of the others.

Lastly, she sounded Godfrey, and was quickly silenced, to her inward indignation, by his answers.

"My dear Elinor, it was for that ignorance I married her. It will now be my own fault if she learns what is not compatible with my ideas of female education."

Thus Mrs. Trevor was reduced to a state that either might break out in open war against the new Mrs. Asheton, or induce her to leave the field at once, and yield up the sway at Asheton Court for good. Fate held the balance even for a time, when Mr. Trevor unwittingly sent up one scale to the very beam, and it was on this wise that he affected it.

One morning, as Marion was feeding her numerous pets, at an hour when both hosts and guests were hardly risen, she unexpectedly encountered Mr. Trevor, peering about, apparently in an unhappy perplexity.

"Can I do anything for you, Mr. Trevor? Have you lost anything?"

"No, no, I thank you; nothing. I was merely looking, casually, by the way."

"Lost your way?" asked Marion, as he paused.

"Yes—no—a little, perhaps. So excellent a young lady—

kind heart, sweet countenance—I was looking for a little new milk.”

“New milk here—among the evergreens?”

“No, no, I mean, of course—’tis the dairy I was looking for, I think, I remember me, it was near here.”

“I will show it to you, Mr. Trevor. But would it not be as well to ring and order——”

“No, no; oh, no, no—thank you. My excellent Elinor, admirable mother, she does not affect new milk, and my little girls, certainly excellent constitutions, yet, I think, a little pale—they do so love a little new milk.”

“I understand now, Mr. Trevor; you wish for some milk for my little nieces.”

“Excellent creature—just so—they will be with me shortly, at eight o’clock. They remain with me the spare time their nurse wishes for her breakfast, and—and they expect me to give them some little thing—not much, no, for my fond Ellinor, ever tender for their health, restricts their too ardent appetites; yet they grow, little dears, and their fondness for milk is very, very great. A doctor, whom I just consulted promiscuously—rather thin I fancied they looked—he ordered new milk.”

“Pray, say no more, Mr. Trevor, I am sure they may have as much as they choose.”

“Not so; excellent young lady, highly principled, truly. I give them just a little at this early hour, their nurse being absent.”

“You wish no one to know they have it?”

“Ah! yes; just so, exactly. The doctor told me they were full young to be on the Homœopathic system for food.”

“Will you come with me; or shall I bring a little milk to you, where you receive your children?”

“Admirable, truly admirable; at eight o’clock, in the small library, we shall be waiting. Will you be so kind as to tender this to the dairy-maid?”

“No; I cannot do that, you must do it yourself; besides, I had better take the milk as for myself, it appearing you do not wish it known that the little girls are to have it.”

“Most true, excellent thought—admirable young lady.”

Marion left him, still bowing and apostrophising her. She had imbibed no great interest for him before, and now he appeared in her eyes as most contemptible.

Nevertheless, she went to the dairy, begged for a bowl of the beautiful fresh milk, not long brought in, asked for some thick

slices of bread and butter, or two rolls, and requested that this primitive refection might be prepared every morning, and placed in the small library by eight o'clock, she bore off her prize to the expectant Mr. Trevor.

His gratitude and delight were equally revolting to Marion's simple nature; and she was about to retire, when they heard the pattering of little feet, and anon, a knock at the door. Mr. Trevor hastily threw the newspaper he was reading over the tray, so as to conceal it, and then, in a voice most ludicrously different from that in which he had addressed Marion, said—

“Come in.”

A stout, forbidding-looking woman ushered in the two meek Miss Trevors, who each made a profound curtsy.

“Thank you, my good nurse. I trust the young ladies have been all you could wish?”

“Pretty good, sir,” answered she, in a short, sharp voice, indicative of a temper to match. “Where's your curtsy to young Madam Asheton?” she whispered angrily to the children, giving them each a push.

The two little girls executed a curtsy to Marion.

“I shall not like them to curtsy to me, nurse, for the future,” said Marion, coming forward, “they must greet me thus—” and she kissed them both, they looking vastly more alarmed than so simple an act might have warranted.

“You are very good, madam;” and with a parting shove, and injunction to “mind their manners,” the nurse withdrew.

When it was really certain she was gone, both the little girls turned suddenly round and bolted the door, by the joint efforts of their little weak fingers. They then ran to their father.

“Papa, papa, what have you got for us—make haste, we are so hungry. Emma had no tea last night, because she was naughty, and I had to hide some of my bread for her.”

During this speech they were rummaging their father's pockets, and drew from them pieces of bread, evidently taken from the dinner table, some cheese, biscuits, and a small bunch of raisins, none of which were improved by having been shut up in Mr. Trevor's pockets. But they devoured them ravenously.

“My darlings—my loves,” said he, kissing them as if he was still half afraid Mrs. Trevor might be peeping through the key-hole. “Sec, sec what I have got for you!” and he withdrew the newspaper.

Their cry of delight was smothered, as they suddenly remembered Marion.

"She will tell—she will tell," they murmured.

"No no, be sure I won't," said Marion, quite content to bear her share in the deceit. "And every morning you shall have the same."

Her pity for them and her contempt for their father grew every moment stronger as she saw their delight and witnessed their excessive enjoyment of so much wholesome food. Moreover, uninteresting little things as they were, it was very pretty to see their fondness for each other; and though drinking out of the same bowl, and eating of the same bread and butter, they yet kept saying to each other:—

"Emma, do taste now, it's nicer than ever."

"Etta, you must eat a bit of my slice—I am sure yours cannot be so good."

And they would watch the effect of each recommendation with the highest delight.

Their father kept on a buzzing murmur of—

"Little darlings—poor loves—angelic young lady—everlasting gratitude," and the like.

But all Marion's pleasure in regarding them vanished when, having drank the last drop, and eaten up the last crumb, they changed at once into the little formal Miss Trevors, Emma saying, "Etta, can you see anything?" and Etta in answer, rubbing all traces of milk from her sister's lips, who did the same for her.

"Oh, Mr. Trevor," exclaimed Marion, tears filling her eyes at such practised deceit in little things so young, and though she said no more, her eyes reproached him, until he reddened up to the small thin hairs that crowned his head.

But he answered nothing; at all times he was rather deficient in speech, and rightly interpreting his look of confusion, Marion withdrew, sad to think what sort of beings the Miss Trevors would become, under the different courses pursued by their father and mother.

Now this secret, only known to Mrs. Godfrey Asheton, Mr. and the Miss Trevors, and partially the dairy-maid, became a blazing fact to the whole world, through the maladroitness of Sir Robert Fane.

Feelingly alive to the pale looks of Mrs. Godfrey Asheton and her somewhat saddened spirits, Sir Robert one morning, after urging her to partake of various delicacies at breakfast, remarked—

"But I know it is useless—you, my dear sister, have your

breakfast at a more healthy hour than we do, and of more wholesome viands. I think, Cecilia, it would benefit you to adopt your sister's new habit, and breakfast at eight o'clock, on a bowl of new milk and a piece of brown bread."

Marion blushed deeply, and glanced at Mr. Trevor, while Mrs. Trevor exclaimed—

"Absurd, quite absurd to affect such diet, but it shows from whence these tastes arise. I mean, in fact, that milk and brown bread are now quiet exploded articles of diet in any abode but farm-houses or low cottages. You can trace their effect upon the blowsy complexions and thick skins of girls brought up on this food; I never permit my girls to touch either. Tea, weak, with one teaspoon full of the richest cream, is all I allow, and you see them—no complexions can be clearer. Cream is—"

Here Mrs. Trevor proceeded to explain the properties of cream, and why it was more wholesome than milk in it, during which Marion recovered her complexion. Mr. Trevor had not evinced the slightest emotion from the first, and looked now perfectly wooden.

Thus the danger might have been warded off, had not Mrs. Trevor wound up her peroration by saying—

"But why on earth Marion is not able to eat her breakfast with us, of the things provided for us, I am quite unable to define."

"Precisely the remark I was about to make, my dear Ellinor," said Godfrey.

"I take no breakfast until I take it here, with you," remarked Marion, again sending an appealing look to Mr. Trevor. He only looked more wooden.

Godfrey rang the bell, and desired the servant, when he appeared, to ask who had milk and bread for breakfast in the morning, and by whose orders.

"Mine are the orders," said Marion, as the servant withdrew. Sir Robert had seen the appealing look to Mr. Trevor.

"And Emma and Etta have what is brought," said he.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Mrs. Trevor, "absurd!—allow me to ring, my dear mother; you shall hear from their own lips how untrue this assertion is."

Alas for the morals of the poor little girls! Emma said she did not know the taste of new milk.

Etta declared pretty much the same, and both put on countenances as imperturbable as their father's.

Marion looked from one to the other in dismay, and as Mrs.

Trevor broke out in hasty, indignant upbraidings, and Godfrey looked at her as he had never done before, astonished and stern, she felt a strange choking sensation, a fluttering at her heart. She suddenly put an end to all further remarks, by fainting away.



CHAPTER XVII.

FULL OF MORAL REFLECTIONS, WHICH END IN EVERY-DAY FACTS.

INSIGNIFICANT, not to say childish, as such scenes described in the last chapter are, yet of such are half the ills of human tempers made up. These little beginnings form the nucleus of wicked deeds, that appal one half mankind, and shock the other. It is to them we owe hatred, envy, malice. From them proceed violence, passion, murder. Let us not think lightly of the first beginnings of ill-will: it takes but a little matter to turn it into hatred.

People full of themselves, their own rules, their indomitable wishes, are always slow in action. Thus Marion had fainted and been caught in the arms of Sir Robert (who privately thought it the wisest thing she could do), whilst Godfrey was yet conjecturing how he should deport himself towards her regarding this affair of the Miss Trevors, and their supposed early breakfast.

His father was hanging over his darling May Flower, calling upon her in moving terms, before he realised that Mrs. Godfrey Asheton had really, without notice, without giving him any preparation, fainted away.

But as the perception dawned on him, there was no lack of tenderness then. Taking her up in his own arms, with his face as white as hers, whispering soft words of love in her ear, he bore her up to her chamber, and sternly bidding Mrs. Trevor stay where she was (she, of course, fussing after them), he permitted no one to attend to her but himself.

"My Marion," said he fondly, as he saw her colour returning, and the tears beginning to flow, "no one is here but myself; take courage, love, and let me look into your sweet eyes."

"What has happened to me, Godfrey?" she whispered.

"I know not, love; but that you fainted, and why, you must tell me yourself."

"It was those little girls. Oh, Godfrey, such deceit!"

"Nay, love, you were moved by some other cause; besides, Ellinor cannot be mistaken."

And these latter words caused the pallid hue again to spread over Marion's brow. There was in his voice, if not in his manner, an unyielding solidity. Whoever might be wrong in this case, it could not be one born an Asheton.

"You are pale again, Marion; are you sure you are well?"

"No; I am ill. I have felt ill for some time. I am not habituated to such late hours. My dresses are so heavy, I feel faint in them. That is your mother's step, it is she who is knocking at the door."

"Godfrey, I must speak to you immediately," said Mrs. Asheton, outside the door.

"Come in, my dear mother, Marion is better."

"Not on any account; I must speak to you alone."

As Marion lay extended on the sofa, after Godfrey had tenderly kissed and left her, she heard the conversation between her husband and mother more distinctly from her recumbent posture.

"No one, not a single soul. It must have been that which made her faint."

"Impossible, mother, why should it?" Nothing could be more indignant than Godfrey's voice.

"Marion tried to rise, and warn them they were speaking too loudly."

"He crossed before the window at the very time. She is very sensitive, you know."

"Faint for him! faint at the sight of——"

Marion heard no more, for, startled by her husband's voice, and the efforts she made to reach the door, once more the room seemed to go round with her, and as she touched the handle, she fell heavily against it.

When she recovered her senses, she found herself laid upon her own bed, partially undressed, the room darkened. As she grew accustomed to the gloom, she recognised Dr. Ford, Mrs. Asheton, and Pinner near it.

"Am I ill?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear young lady; you must remain quiet. Mr. Godfrey is close by—within call, if it would calm you to see him."

He soon came; and, though it was evident to the quick eye of his wife that something unusual had occurred, she suffered herself to be well content to lie still, holding his hand.

Towards evening she was so much better, she was able to sit up; and then she was told by the doctor she must guard her life carefully, for the sake of one unborn.

She smiled a little soft smile of great happiness, as she glanced up at Godfrey.

He bent his head over her, and whispered all he had to say, and, satisfied that whatever had occurred to upset his usual equanimity, it was this happy intelligence, she grew hourly better. Only when they were all gone down to dinner, did the remembrance of the little Trevor girls return to her mind. Full of strange inexplicable thoughts, those thoughts that come unbidden to the heart of a young and sensitive being, when she first learns that another life is bound up in that of her own, Marion prayed earnestly to God for help to do good towards the little misguided girls. Moved to do so, because she dared hardly pray for that other life, as yet unknown to her, and yet must she beseech God for good to them in the firm hope that she might obtain a blessing also for the unborn.

Tender and careful were they all of her; and as old Mr. Asheton was visibly the worse for all the late dinners and gaiety, he and Marion were alike treated as invalids, and had early meals together.

Then did Marion beseech the kind grandfather to have the little girls down to see him for an hour every evening, while the late dinner was being served. And as he whispered in her ear his happiness at the news he had heard, he besought her not again to incur the dangers of fainting, by over care for them.

"I like every one under my roof to be happy," said he, "but you are my dearest and first care."

"They are very fond of each other, grandpapa. It is their father who is to blame. I think they would not be so deceitful, if he was more open with Ellinor, and pointed out the want of more food and clothing."

"I should like them to be happy, poor little things, again reiterated the old gentleman, "and therefore I must do what their father neglects."

"At present, let us send for them now, we can talk to them quietly. It dwells on my mind—such practised deceit. And, grandfather, if you ordered some chocolate and cake for us all. I think, perhaps, every one would be happy then."

"Dear, sweet May, where did you learn to be so thoughtful for others?"

"Love makes every heart so. We all loved each other in my first home—to that point, the pleasure of the others was the chief delight of the one. It was not so much what we could give up, as that none should think there was a sacrifice in the matter. Grandpapa, my people were very good, so simple and so religious; I can compare our home to the many different places and homes into which I have been since God took them, and in none have I seen such faith and goodness."

"Well, love, you must teach us those pleasant ways. I would fain look back on my past life with satisfaction; but, May Flower, I cannot say, as I would wish to do, in the presence of the Almighty, that I have thought only of my God. I fear me it is the other way."

"I think we are all faulty in that respect."

Mr. Asheton shook his head, as if to say that was no excuse for him.

"We will send for my little granddaughters," said he at last.

They were some time making their appearance, and their nurse was apparently bent on remaining with them. The little girls, too, rather clung to her, as if afraid of the kind grandpapa. But in truth it was Marion whom they feared, the very gentleness of her looks upbraiding them. By degrees, the withdrawal of their nurse, the appearance of chocolate and cake, the knowledge that they were to partake of luxuries that favoured more of fairyland than reality, thawed their little congealed frames.

It was with a pity almost akin to tears that their grandfather watched their delight, and the little traits of affection that they exhibited towards each other.

"You are sure your chair is as comfortable as mine, Etta," whispered Emma, in a sort of little old-fashioned imitation of her mother's manner.

"It is very comfortable, indeed; but is your piece of cake as large as mine?"

It was then that Marion, keeling down between them, asked in a low voice, "If they knew the meaning of truth?"

Blushing, hesitating, and confused, glancing at their grandfather, and again at Marion, they simultaneously commenced a little crying duet.

"We are not so naughty as Edward," said one.

"No, indeed: we are much gooder," said the other.

"He pinches Emma——"

"And he scratches Etta——"

"And he burns holes everywhere——"

"And he breaks everything——"

"And he tells——"

"Yes, that we——"

"Do all this mischief——"

"And it is he all the while."

It is impossible to express the ludicrous manner in which the poor little maidens poured out, in sing-song fashion, this catalogue of crimes, and the sort of triumph with which they ended.

"But because Edward is naughty, you need not be so."

"Can we be good as you?"

"Yes; but then I cannot say what is untrue."

"Then we cannot be like you; we said so last night."

"Come, promise that you will try. Grandmamma is going to give a present to the one that always speaks the truth."

"I hope Emma will get it."

"No, no, Etta must have it."

"My little darlings, come, kiss your grandpapa; you shall each have a present for being such good little sisters. Now, tell me what you would like best."

"Chocolate and cake," said both at once.

"Nay, that you shall have every day."

"A muff for Emma's hands; she has sad chilblains."

"But summer is coming," suggested Marion.

"Two large dolls—fine waxen babies," suggested the old gentleman, "who could think of nothing else."

The little girls' eyes sparkled with delight; but they said, with the utmost primness—

"The Miss Trevors are too old for dolls."

Their grandfather could not but smile.

"Then," said he, "think over it, and let me know to-morrow, when you come for chocolate and cake."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TREATS OF DIFFERENT TEMPERs AND FEELINGS.

SIR ROBERT FANE had suddenly departed—a long and mysterious interview with Godfrey and Mrs. Asheton had preceded his departure; and, if none of the gentry in Asheton Court knew it, some of the servants were cognizant of the fact that he was not alone in the carriage as it drove away from the back premises.

A hurricane can only express the storm raised by Mrs. Trevor, upon receiving a remonstrance from her father on the defective morals of the faultless Miss Trevors, founded on Mrs. Godfrey Asheton's statements. Not only was Marion utterly swamped, and borne away in a torrent of invectives, but Mr. Asheton himself was reduced to a state of mental bewilderment. Persuaded out of what he had seen with his own eyes, apologising for false statements that he knew to be true, made to eat his own words until he did not know what he said, he was very nearly driven into a severe fit of illness.

Mrs. Asheton upbraided him, Godfrey wondered at him, Lady Fane condoled with him, and Mrs. Trevor stormed on.

Fortunately, no power or persuasion of hers could induce Godfrey to let her speak to Marion on the subject.

Any danger to the future heir was not to be incurred for the injured honour of the best Asheton among them. Thus, though Marion fell in Mrs. Asheton's estimation, in her husband's, even in the fond love of her father-in-law, she was not told of it. The old gentleman had to bear the whole brunt of it; and as that was very small satisfaction to Mrs. Trevor, who had made him retract and apologise, until she herself was tired, and feeling that she must "speak or die" to the real culprit, at last she bore herself off to Mannering Hall, accompanied by the unfortunate little beings of the whole turmoil, and their father.

So strongly was Ellinor's superiority a fact in the family—so vehemently had she pictured her wrongs—so guilty did Mr. Asheton feel, as she painted his sudden trust and faith in one so young, so lately known—that he felt he could hardly do enough

for her, and was ready to blame himself, as well as Marion, to the fullest extent Mrs. Trevor could wish.

But he joined with Godfrey in strenuously averting anything that might cause a recurrence of fainting fits. The heir of the Ashetons was to be no sickly puny witling. After his birth Mrs. Trevor might then "have it out" with one who "already showed the meddling disposition of her Aunt Flower."

That remark made a deep hole in Godfrey's heart, and something else besides; none of Marion's sweet ways had power to efface either.

Meantime, amid it all, the glow of happiness made all other ills painless. He was to be a father—he might, from the hour of its birth, rear up a being who should become that companion he had so long sought in vain through this ungenial world to find.

No longer solitary, spirit-weary, or morbidly sad, he had now a work to do, that was to benefit posterity as well as himself—the world should now see a perfect specimen of the genus man. An Asheton brought up and educated solely by an Asheton.

For twenty-eight years he had lived without an object—been sensible of no strong sensations but a desire to avoid contact with the obnoxious beings by whom he was surrounded. Now, like the little stream suddenly meeting with the great ocean, and pouring itself out without hesitation, with blind confidence, into the world of waters from which it never returned, did Godfrey give himself up, with an enthusiasm bordering on folly, to the contemplation of the task before him. He literally thought of nothing else; otherwise he would not have been blind to the sensitive heart of Marion suddenly shutting itself up to him. With all their care, she quickly saw the change in those around her.

The fond expressions suddenly dropped by Mr. Asheton, his little hasty reproofs, his fears about one thing, and his hopes about another, all told her of some secret influence that, for the time being, had closed his heart against her.

Mrs. Asheton no longer gave her the place as of an honoured daughter of the house, but rather treated her as a little wayward child, repelling, in a manner that ordinary mortals would have thought rude, any further attempts at intimacy with the inhabitants of the Wood-head.

Lady Fane, too, added to Marion's perplexity by sending Edward out of the room whenever she entered, by constant remarks on her sister's injudicious management, yet still more

severe ones on those who could dare to pass judgment on her. Even her gentle nature could not forgive a Flower presuming to find fault with an Asheton.

That Mrs. Trevor should depart without thinking it necessary to pay her sister-in-law the common compliment of taking leave, gave Marion an idea as to whom she was indebted for this change in the affections of her new family. The accidental encounter of the little girls just before they left, which they did subsequently to that of their father and mother, in a hired chaise, with nursemaid and packages, established the fact.

Of course Mrs. Trevor intended the chaise with her daughters to leave immediately after the carriage that contained her and her husband.

But servants generally have taken a diploma in the art of delay. And during the time they were indispensably doing nothing, the little girls ran breathlessly into the small study now sacred to Marion and her sofa.

"Aunt May, pray forgive us," they both whispered. "We love you better and better. Pray kiss us, and remember Emma and Etta. We can never be like you, but we can always wish we were. And though mamma says you are so naughty, and tell lies, we know you don't—we know it is all our faults. And, Aunt May, we promise we will say nothing untrue, if we possibly can."

Having sung out this little duet, they ran from the room as suddenly as they entered it.

Marion's heart was a brave one as to endurance. And though to be loved was necessary to her nature, she felt no consciousness of having deserved to lose the affection of those around her. This made her bear with unwavering sweetness the present mood of the Asheton family. But, above all, she carried in her heart the hope, the knowledge, that soon she should have a love all her own—that ere many months had passed, the little lonely orphaned girl should press to her heart a living object, which, though small, would fill up all the vacant places in her affections; and strongly as Godfrey might feel on the matter, his thoughts faded into nothing when compared with the ardent feelings of one whose sympathies came pure from heaven itself.

The little unborn babe appeared to her a link connecting her more closely with the spirits of her departed parents—a present sent to her from them, in which she would be able to trace a likeness to each, and love it all the more. Neither did she forget her husband. As the mother of his child, she would have an

undoubted claim upon his affections; no longer a dubious appendage to the family, an admitted member of it, but scarcely yet an honoured one, as the mother of an Asheton, she would become hallowed in their eyes.

For all this she could wait patiently until the birth of her child, not moved to feel even resentment towards those now so unjust towards her, or Beatrice, who was cruelly unkind.

Marion sat on the rock seat, having walked there under the strict care of her husband. She rested, while he below, within her sight, walked to and fro by the side of the waves.

It was a most lovely day. Earth, air, and sky, tinted with the hues of coming summer. One of those May days that begin in the morning with a touch of April, and end in the evening with the full warmth of June. The breath of the air was balmy, the smell of the flowers was fragrant, the bloom of the earth was fresh, while the hue of the sky only paled as you looked at the sea, and all the space of air was filled with the sweet summer sounds of birds, bees, and insects.

Marion could not help rejoicing in spirit over so much beauty, and her heart was as light with happiness as any of the winged creatures about her.

She compared her fortunes to the cloudless day before her, and thanked God with humility for the prospect. But as if in answer to the prayer, a shadow came over the fair sea. Looking up, she saw a storm cloud, hanging from the heavens like a circular curtain, born up by cloud rings, the darker folds of which stretched down, even until they touched the sea, which was rippled on its smooth surface with the stormy rain drops. She watched it passing slowly on, darkening every thing it passed over. "But," she said to herself, "I can see the blue sky behind, and everything looks fairer than it did before. The storm cloud has but brightened the day."

Hearing a footstep coming, her visionary thoughts gave place to reality.

It was Beatrice.

"So the tender and devoted husband has placed his treasure here, has he? I saw him pacing up and down on the sands, and concluded I should find you."

"I am so much better, I walk nearly every day now; my mother comes for me in the carriage soon."

"Yes, it is like the Ashetons truly. Anything for themselves they will regard. But you need not take the flattering unction to your soul that it is for your sake."

"I am aware that I am in disgrace."

"You had judged better for yourself if you had accepted Julian. With him, at least you would been loved for yourself only."

"You forget, Beatrice, you are speaking to a wife."

"Yes, such a wife too! A child-wife! Shortly we shall know you only as the baby Asheton's mamma."

Beatrice saw that Marion was silent under her bitter scoffing, from some motive she did not understand, for there was no fear in her gaze—rather a sort of pity.

"Mrs. Trevor desired me to tell you, the first opportunity I had, she never could forgive you."

"Then she is to be pitied."

"Shall I tell her so from you? She is already your enemy; how can you cope with her if she becomes an active one?"

"I must take my chance."

"A poor one, let me tell you; I shall live to see you mourn the day you refused Julian."

Again no answer. Marion's face expressed all too strongly for the passionate Beatrice, her contempt.

"You are, and will be, to Godfrey Asheton nothing but the mother of his children. You disbelieve me? Why then had he that clause for a separate maintenance put into his marriage settlement?"

Marion's eyes asked her what she meant, though she said nothing.

"It is provided in your settlement that upon either of you expressing a wish to be separated, two thousand a-year is to be your portion. Judge if Mr. Asheton could have loved you, and yet demand such a clause?"

"He will love me, I have no fear;" yet the colour left Marion's cheek as she answered; then, it suddenly returning with a quick rush, she rose, confronting Beatrice—"Say to Mrs. Trevor, if indeed she sent me the message you now gave, that I grieve to have offended her, though I know not the cause. But say to Beatrice Flower that her cousin Marion contemns, spurns, hears not words that ought never to have been spoken to Mrs. Asheton. Now, I desire that you leave me. A minute more, and I shall think my cousin Beatrice lacks a woman's chief ornament, namely, her womanly thoughts."

For a moment Beatrice was confounded.

But flushing high with anger, she answered—

"If you again faint at sight of Count Julian, you will afford

Mr. Godfrey Asheton an opportunity of proving his intention to abide by that clause. Well, as he restrained himself once, he will not do so twice."

Marion's countenance expressed both indignation and astonishment; but as if disdaining to reply, she waved her handkerchief to her husband as a token that she was ready to join him.

"Well, as they kept their secret, they are in my power, those proud Ashetons. At any moment I can publish to the world that their new daughter, the fastidious Mr. Godfrey Asheton's wife, fainted at the sight of her former lover, and bethink you how they will like that."

Still no reply. Even the momentary indignation was gone.

In her intemperate mood, hot and angry flowed the words of Beatrice, furnished with stings of bitter taunting, that recoiled back upon herself, for Marion's eyes still met hers in fearless innocence.

She heard, too, with the quick ear of love, her husband's step, and as he appeared in sight, she held Beatrice by her dress, for she started and turned, as if about to fly.

"Has Count Julian di Ramiano been here lately?" she demanded of Godfrey.

He could not but answer her with the same frankness with which she put the question.

"He passed the window as you fainted that morning. I thought it was the shock which caused you to do so."

"No; I did not see him; only now have I learnt he has been here."

"If Miss Flower has been the means of this explanation," said Godfrey, his eyes bright and smiling, "I thank her, for indeed, May, I was unhappy about it."

"Is it this that causes my mother to be less kind to me?"

"I think more because of my sister Ellinor. Come home, love. I should like to tell her we have been mistaken, in this, at all events. Thank you much, Miss Flower."

And that latter young lady had the satisfaction of seeing Mr. Asheton escort his wife down the steep path with an attention and care that showed he was intent upon making up to her for past injustice. And she then and there experienced what many of us do, "how unruly is that little member, the tongue."

CHAPTER XIX.

WHICH DETAILS THE THEORY OF EDUCATION, ILLUSTRATED BY ONE WHO
WAS NEVER EDUCATED.

IN addition to teaching Marion various little fragments of learning, not too tiresome to worry her, Godfrey Asheton set himself seriously to study the different modes of education, and the rules laid down by competent judges for the forming of the infant mind.

Scarcely considering Marion capable of giving an opinion on the matter; aware that his father, still more his mother, judged that no education could have produced better results than that pursued in his case, Godfrey entered into a long correspondence with his favourite sister, Mrs. Trevor.

A theory is always admirable upon paper. It is only when put into practice, that it assumes that appearance of human frailty attendant upon all the works of man; who that is born of a woman can conceive, execute and finish a work, and be able to lay his hand on his heart and say, "Behold it is very good."

God-like may be the ideas, the thoughts, that a human heart can conceive, but man-like will be its execution, stamped with the mildew of imperfection.

Thus, Mr. Godfrey Asheton and Mrs. Trevor, between them, drew up a course of training and education that was to make a perfect gentleman of the unborn heir. By "gentleman," be it understood they meant "the finished man."

Without giving his parents to understand that they had made one great mistake in educating him, it was owing to this mistake that he did not now take them into his councils. For he intended no such omission to befall his son. Both his sister and himself agreed thoroughly on this ground, which some weak-minded British father may think was, that Mr. Godfrey Asheton had never attended any public school, in which they guessed correctly. But in fact they assured themselves that to make a perfect, a finished English gentleman, it was absolutely necessary he should be brought up abroad.

On the classic ground of Italy would he become properly imbued with its glorious ancient language, its flowing musical

modern tongue. From thence, he could imbibe the metaphysical profundities of German literature, and sun himself with the light laughter-loving pleasantries of the French school. Inhaling, withal, a contempt for the beef-eating, shop-keeping propensities of the English nation, standing out in bold relief among them as a "finished man."

He was to be a poet, a musician, a painter, a sculptor, an author—everything but a fox-hunting, sporting, joyous English squire. That is, if he did not show a talent in any of these accomplishments, at least he was to know enough to pass instant judgment upon any other proficient.

Mrs. Trevor wrote very good letters. They were to the point, and separated from her didactic voice, her opinions appeared less like oracles of divination. Besides, she read a good deal, and she had no qualms of conscience about using the remarks of authors as if they were her own. It was a useless ceremony putting little commas at the beginning and ending of her quotations, for two reasons. The putting them deranged her ideas, in the first place, and of course Godfrey knew the books as well as herself, in the second.

But with all these advantages, Mrs. Trevor's "Letters upon Education," lacked one element. They had never been tested. In every line of her persuasive, invincible arguments for foreign education, you could trace the interesting fact that she had never been out of England in her life.

Thus, with her, it was as with idolaters. She worshipped she knew not what. Her very ignorance of anything continental invested it with the charms of mystery, and therefore, to her, of wonder and admiration.

No more thoroughly English family existed than the Ashetons, carrying their pride and exclusiveness so far, that it could only be expressed as the essence of over-refinement; tormenting to themselves, as it was insulting to others.

And in the small experience they had had of any other society than that about Asheton Court—where they ruled to the full bent of their crotchets—everything had tended to disgust them.

They were knocked about in London as obsolete; looked upon as country bores, most considerably in the way; and, therefore, deriving no pleasure from annual visits there, they had long given up their town house, and were at present ignorant of the state of mad progression which was propelling all fast people in the metropolis.

A feeling of insecurity as to what they might encounter abroad, if their own countrymen were so devoted to folly at home, had deterred the elder Ashetons from ever venturing across the Channel. Godfrey once went to Paris for a fortnight, and was highly impressed with the politeness and amiable frankness of the Parisians; and had he been a better French scholar, would have gone again; but he waited to learn the language more perfectly, having discovered that to read, write, and construe it, by no means assists you to speak it. And should he have met with a young Parisienne worthy of the honour, he could not have thought of proposing marriage to her, unless in the authorised idioms of her own language.

So in writing out the programme for the education of the future young Asheton, neither Godfrey nor his sister had any practical experience. They relied upon a beautiful theory.

This was enunciated by Mrs. Trevor in truly Johnsonian periods, sounding erudite and profound, driving "Locke on the Understanding," and "Watts on the Mind," quite into the shade.

Shutting himself up in a remote sort of Gothic temple, that served at one and the same time as a temple for a Diana, always standing in a lively attitude for hunting, but never advancing further, owing, as it appeared, to an elaborately carved Gothic doorway arresting and shocking her Grecian prejudices, and, as a study, sacred to Mr. Godfrey Asheton's private use, and as an ornament to the extreme point of an old-fashioned English garden, he meditated and thought over a long letter received that morning from his sister.

"Yes, my Ellinor," he wrote in answer, "I can now, as you say, realise your feelings when you first became a mother. The disappointments, the annoyances, the many vexations attendant upon every fresh coalition with so ungenial a world, are now atoned for. We have in prospect a society of our own, born of ourselves, reared according to our tastes, refined to the utmost extent of that almost unknown word—certainly utterly misunderstood by more than half the world.

"I can enter into those sad feelings of ill-construed motives that so spoilt your visit to us last May, and am the more able to assure you that never again shall your noble views be misinterpreted.

"If, as you say, I may be disappointed lest the mother of my child is not actuated by the high and disinterested views that actuate yourself (rather because she does not understand them,

Ellinor, I can assure you, than the want of them) still I have you always to council me. Together we can plan arrangements for our children's welfare; together we can make them all that we wish. Fear nothing with regard to my pretty Marion; I know she will feel but too happy to learn a mother's duties from us. Ah, my dear Ellinor, the only drawback to my pleasure is that my son is yet unborn. How many years I shall have to wait ere I see the fruition of all my hopes! But courage!—a short time ago I had not even this exquisite pleasure in prospect—this hope that has already almost made me in love with this world.

"Think of me, my dear Ellinor, when I see my son—when I look into his face, and foreshadow the realisation of all my fondest wishes—the signs, unmistakable to a parent's eyes, of how the 'child will be father to the man.'"

Mr. Asheton no doubt believed all this, and thought it very fine; but he was roused from his three different enjoyments of "anticipation," "actual enjoyment," and "after reflection,"—all of which he had brought pellmell into his letter—by loud cries, a general hurry skurry, and a universal shouting of his own name.

He rushed out—he had known it was a momentous time. He had been aware of the advent of a stout female, a few days before. Of course the momentous time was come.

He was wrong—it was over.

"My dear, dear son!" exclaimed his father, meeting him and embracing him—tears and smiles making an April day of his venerable old face—"May would not have you disturbed."

"Oh, my son, my darling Godfrey," cried his mother; "dear little good thing—so patient and so delighted."

"Wish you joy, sir," said the butler, with solemn propriety, all the footmen bowing in imitation.

"Health and happiness to the little darling," cried a host of weeping, excited maids.

"Here, here, this way, let him be the first. Make way, now, Godfrey—now, my dearest son."

And forthwith, in the arms of the aforesaid stout female, lay a little red mass of humanity, guiltless of eyes, deficient in nose, but amply gifted as regards mouth, which, wide open, gave the beholder a favourable view of an agonised little tongue, at the same moment that another organ was saluted by sounds resembling the strangled shrieks of a cat.

Dr. Ford came forward, and while Godfrey was speculating as to what quadruped, biped, or other animal on the face of the globe, owned so extraordinary a production, said, "Congratulate you, Mr. Godfrey, the finest boy I ever saw."



CHAPTER XX.

TAKES US QUITE INTO BABY-LAND.

WHO so fortunate as the Ashetons? They desired an heir and an heir came. Royal houses, ducal coronets, titles of high and ancient families had all prayed for, besieged Heaven with petitions for an heir, and obtained nothing, or a fair phalanx of girls. The Ashetons had but to wish to have. It had certainly entered, with a small spasm of vague fear, into the heart of the little expectant mamma, that girls are born as well as boys. And as she saw all the preparations made only for, and in honour of, an heir, what would be done to her, or it, should her baby prove a girl?

However, it was all right now. She lay pale, but inexpressibly happy, for every one agreed with Dr. Ford, "it was the finest boy they had ever seen."

No, not every one. The new papa was, and continued to be bitterly disappointed. Certainly his experience of the beauty of babies was small. In fact, he had none; he did not know that he had ever seen a child less than a year old, until he saw his own. He may be pardoned for thinking it was almost impossible to conceive anything with Asheton blood in it, so red so ugly, so sleepy, so thirsty, so fond of squalling. For he could not discover that his heir had any other peculiarities about him than the above-mentioned, unless it might be the trifling amusement, when he was said to be awake, of making curious grimaces.

Godfrey put all his books upon education back on their respective shelves. He locked up his sister's letters, and he dismissed all idea of commencing the training of the "Finished Man" for the present, gladly leaving him to the entire care and supervision of his doting mamma. And he obeyed an oft-expressed wish of his father's, that he would interest himself

about country affairs, and take his proper place among the gentry as one of Her Majesty's justices of the peace. He had a sort of idea in his mind it would be as well to study human nature a little more, ere he commenced the great work of producing a model for mankind.

Meantime, in the eyes of old Mr. Asheton, and secretly in the heart of Mrs. Asheton, though she did not allow it, there never was seen so pretty a sight as Marion and her boy.

The girlish happiness that had so charmed the old gentleman on his first acquaintance, returned to her eyes and mouth, making the former quite refulgent, and the latter breaking out into fresh dimples every day.

The doubt, the hesitation, the slight shadow of an inward sadness that had fallen on her gay spirit, on her acceptance of Godfrey Asheton as her husband, and which continued to the birth of her child—all were gone. She was the mother of the finest boy that ever was seen, and he was an Asheton. Henceforward she was one of them. That bugbear of a "separate maintenance" that had sunk into her heart, spite of all her bravery towards Beatrice, vanished. Godfrey might be displeased, angry; but as for separating from the mother of his boy, that was impossible. Did she not pour upon his son a shower of additional kisses on discovering the faintest outline of an eyebrow that promised to take the same form as his father's? Did she not upbraid that darling, dearest, loveliest of little pets, because, when he did open his eyes, all good judges pronounced them blue, and she thought him "so naughty" not to have his own best papa's beautiful black ones?

In fact, judging by herself, she felt she loved her boy most, because he was her Godfrey's son. She grew prettier and fairer every day under this new pleasure; and had Mrs. Trevor come down upon her with the whole mountain of her smothered wrath and indignation, she would have emerged bright and smiling as ever from beneath it. Greatly to that worthy lady's disgust, it seemed likely that, in consideration of Marion's amiable conduct in giving the Ashetons an heir, all her former sins were to be ignored.

Old Mr. Asheton had forgotten everything but that his May Flower was as the very light of his eyes.

Mrs. Asheton passed by, or glossed over, any little hints about it.

Godfrey apparently remembered nothing.

But this indifference should have an atonement. A day of

reckoning was imperative, and would be all the heavier the longer it was delayed.

"Does he not grow, grandpapa?" asked Marion, as she held up her two months' old boy to have his morning kiss.

"Wonderfully, most wonderfully, my May," answered the delighted old gentleman; "and his eyes, yes—the very colour—they will be yours exactly, pretty one."

"Ah, so naughty of him to have blue eyes. But his hair, father, is very, very dark; nurse thinks it will be the exact colour of Godfrey's."

"That is well, my love; if it pleases the Almighty to give my Godfrey any more children, I trust they may all blend the father and mother together—I shall love them all the more."

"Nurse says she never saw any child so intelligent at his age. Will you hold him, grandpapa, and you see he will follow me with his eyes all round the room."

This little conversation will prove to the world at large, and my readers in particular, that Mr. Godfrey Asheton had no real reason to be so dissatisfied with the embryo of the "finished man."

"My May Flower," said Mr. Asheton, after half an hour of this interesting confabulation, "I have a letter for you. My poor little dear granddaughters kindly write to their old grandfather now and then, and as far as I can judge, this must be meant for you. The letter to me has been supervised by their governess, but this appears to me to have been some spontaneous epistle of their own."

It was a remarkable document, considering that it was the production of young ladies so faultlessly educated, and appeared to be written, sentence by sentence, one after the other, by the little girls, on a leaf torn from an old copy-book:—

"DEAR AUNT MAY,—Emma and I are very glad to hear that you have given us a little cousin, and Etta and I hope that he is not at all like Edward. Emma says, will you give him a kiss from us, with our love. Etta thinks him a lucky cousin, because he will have chocolate and cake with grandpapa. I daresay our new cousin always speaks the truth—yes, because he is Aunt May's child. We are not very good yet, but Emma is the best. No, indeed, for Etta was whipped rather than say what Aunt May does not like.

"We are, your little fond nieces,

"EMMA AND ETTA."

"Poor little pets," said their old grandfather, "I never gave them their presents to this day; for though my dear Ellinor selected an 'Arrowsmith's Atlas' for one, and the new edition of 'Johnson's Dictionary' for the other, I misdoubt me but they would have liked waxen babies best, so I did not consider them as my presents."

"Their new cousin must send them presents, grandpapa; and as he came from the Fairy Land of Happiness and Delight, he can only choose the toys made there."

"A pretty idea, my pet. Here is my purse. I will willingly be the banker of my fine boy."

"My cousin Prissy and I are going with baby and nurse for a drive. We will see what toys N—— produces, if you please, father."

We have, in the interest of the new heir of Asheton Court, rather lost sight of the amiable Prissy, a great favourite with all who really know her.

If anyone rejoiced over the birth of May's baby, it was Prissy.

If anyone had known for a certainty it would be a boy, of course it was Prissy. Though, for her part, if it had been a girl, she would have loved it all the same—it was Marion's baby. But some people are so foolish as always to set their hearts upon having a boy, and as May always did just the right thing, why, of course, it was a boy.

In writing to inform Beatrice of the joyous event (who had long ago departed to her Italian relations), she was so impressed with the idea that everyone would of course know it was a boy, she did not discover, until reading her letter over to correct the spelling (Mrs. Flower and Prissy were not clever at spelling), that she had never mentioned what it was.

Prissy observed signs and wonders in the Asheton baby that even escaped the fond notice of his mother and nurse. If he yawned, "Did you ever see anything so natural?" cried Prissy; "he might be six years old at the least." Did he smile, "What a darling! he will be bursting out laughing soon."

"Nurse says that when babies smile so young, Prissy, it is because they are thinking of the heaven which they have just left."

"Law!" answered Prissy, gazing at baby with awe and respect. "Well, he is quite a little angel, you know, so no wonder."

CHAPTER XXI.

IN WHICH A PIECE OF GOOD LUCK BEFALLS SIR ROBERT FANE.

It pleased the Fates about this time to remind Mrs. Trevor of the necessity there was for a Trevor Castle, and she plunged into all the delights of building, planning, and altering, to the banishment of every other idea.

It happily was a talent with her, whatever was to be done, she understood thoroughly how it was to be done, and no matter at what sacrifice, she gave herself up to the matter until it was done.

These sorts of one-idea'd people are great nuisances for the time being. They can think of, talk about, and dream of nothing but the one fact that is absorbing themselves, and are surprised and irritated if you are not as enthusiastic as they are.

Thus, the birth of the young heir faded in importance to the creation of Trevor Castle; and quitting Mannering Hall, the Trevor's established themselves, as near to the important work as a tidy abode could be found.

Godfrey visited them very often; sent for on any important matter for consideration by Mrs. Trevor.

The question of building a house according to the fortune that is ready to sustain it, was not mooted by Mrs. Trevor. Her husband ventured a remonstrance now and then, and Godfrey hinted that the estate itself was too small in acreage to require a baronial castle. But the architect had his ideas upon the matter, which, it need hardly be said, were to fool Mrs. Trevor to the top of her bent.

The nature feminine is, when characterised by energy, of such an impetuous sort, that steam engines and express trains are slow to them. Mrs. Trevor began to weary of the length of time the walls were rising in her new mansion; the dull details of so many feet of bricks, stone, and mortar proved too much for her.

She began to think of something else. She had never seen her brother's boy, now nine months old. She heard it was a very fine child; it was about time she went to judge if they were bringing him up properly. Also she had yet that debt of wrath to fling upon Mrs. Godfrey Asheton's head, and a dutiful

fit took possession of her. It was very long since she had seen her father and mother.

Just as all her preparations were made, her plans settled, the works of Trevor Castle placed on such a footing that they could progress without the assistance of her vigilant eyes, a circumstance occurred, unforeseen, unaccountable.

Strange as it was for one born an Asheton to do such a thing, before the proper time for an Asheton to grow sick and ailing, Lady Fane broke a blood-vessel in her lungs, and was for some time in a precarious state.

She had not expressed any wish to see her sister, but Mrs. Trevor, labouring under the idea that the whole thing was a mistake, and that her presence was necessary to put an end to any such nonsense, came on the instant, accompanied, of course, by her amiable husband and accomplished girls.

Disinterested parties must be informed that Mrs. Trevor had another motive, not even acknowledged to herself. It was very seldom that, in the course of her life, she had ever desired a thing that she did not get it. But there was one, now become a master passion, from the fact of never having even had the chance of gratifying it, that sped her on the wings of hope to Rollinston Court. She was dying to have a short and decisive control over that utterly spoilt child, Edward Fane.

Of course, in his mother's present sad condition, he would no longer be able to avail himself of the shelter of her dress; he would probably be banished her presence; what an opportunity for Mrs. Trevor's salutary and most necessary reform!

But she miscalculated the love of the mother. Lady Fane did not care whether she died or not, apparently; but she did care never to have her darling out of her sight, except for the exercise necessary for his health. And then he was so carefully guarded by two servants, that were as likely to tell Mrs. Trevor to mind her own business and leave them to perform theirs, as not, that it was useless placing herself within the power of such an insult.

Though he could no longer hide himself in the folds of his mother's dress, the curtains of her bed were yet more favourable, and Mrs. Trevor was perpetually being startled by his little wizard eyes peering out at her, first at one side, and then on the other; besides knowing from ocular demonstration, that he was inventing quite a new series of faces for her especial benefit.

The hope of having one short favourable moment which she could use for the benefit of the moral improvement of Master

Fane, dragged Mrs. Trevor on through the autumn months, with occasional short flying visits to Trevor Castle—that is, what there was of it.

Lady Fane's illness was of that delusive kind, which made the hope of one day but the sport of the succeeding one.

There was one person who looked upon the Trevor invasion pretty much as the ancient Briton regarded the incursions of Danes and Normans, Saxons and Picts.

After frankly informing Mr. Trevor that, as he had brought his whole family with him for an indefinite time, he was happy to retain their company as lodgers, not visitors, Sir Robert intended to make the best of this incursion on to his private kingdom. But Mrs. Trevor, tolerable as a visitor, was intolerable as a permanent inmate. Every maxim of courtesy and politeness, every code of hospitality and forbearance, every palliative of reason and common sense, faded into one strong determination to get rid of her somehow, no matter if the doing thereof caused a permanent quarrel.

Just as he had arranged the mode of effecting this desirable object, all was upset by Mrs. Trevor asking him a very commonplace question.

"Robert, where do you mean to reside, when you have to leave Rollinston Court?"

"What do you mean?" asked he, breathless.

"Of course, you know, Godfrey expects another child in the spring; I have engaged to go there, to spare my mother any anxiety."

Had he not been dreading this very announcement? The impossibility of making an enemy of one who was not wrong when she asserted her brother would do nothing without her advice, made him swallow his anger and disgust. "Cecilia is almost well now," added Mrs. Trevor; "we shall have no east wind this winter." But the winter cruelly belied her. Determined not to be baffled by the east wind, she remained with her sister until warmer weather ensued, and so far got her own way, that Lady Fane began at last visibly to grow stronger.

"Of course," wrote Mrs. Trevor to her mother, "I, from the first, told them how it would be. Now that Cecilia sees the folly of adhering to the doctor's orders instead of mine, there is some hopes of her getting stronger. But when she persisted in remaining in her room during that fine brisk frost (really the best frost we have had for years, the river was quite frozen over) she could not hope to amend. My girls delighted in it,

and ran about in their summer frocks (we had only brought our muslins with us, not expecting to stay so long, but I am always ready to devote myself to those who need it) just as if it was May. Emma is a little lame from chilblains, and Etta has a roughness of skin which I believe servants call 'a chapped skin.' But what is that to the health and strength they are gaining? As I tell them, the summer will set all those things straight. I am only grieved I am a prisoner to the house, from a slight sprain in one ancle, which I think arose from standing a long time by Cecilia, persuading her to cut off Edward's hair. Really it is impeding his growth. But, however, to return to my first subject, Cecilia is, I am happy to say, out to-day for the first time, in the chariot, and it is as lovely an April day as I ever saw. I think I may now safely leave her, which you may be certain I should not do as long as I saw my presence was necessary. I hope to find you all well at Asheton Court, and look forward to being able to give Marion much valuable advice. I should decidedly prevent young Rupert from walking at all. Indeed, I was quite surprised to hear that he was allowed to do so at nine months old. Pray, put a stop to it. Think of Godfrey's feelings, should his son be bow-legged. But I shall so soon be with you, that I need say no more. I shall be in ample time, I can assure you, my dear mother, so pray do not consider it necessary to be anxious."

But for once Mrs. Trevor was wrong. A letter crossed hers on the road, announcing the arrival of Godfrey's second child.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Trevor, pettishly, as she read the letter containing the news, at breakfast, "it is over."

"What?" said Sir Robert, who could not for worlds have said another word.

"Marion's confinement."

Fortunately Mr. Trevor asked the very question Sir Robert had not nerves to put.

"A boy! I am sure I don't know—read for yourself, Trevor, if you are curious. For my part I shall not now go to Asheton Court for some months. I only settled to do so to relieve my mother, and the event being over, of course there is no further anxiety. People of Marion's stamp always recover so unbecomingly soon."

Sir Robert had snatched the letter, as she tossed it to Mr. Trevor, and read it before that worthy had adjusted his eyeglass, for, in addition to other awkwardnesses, Mr. Trevor was short-sighted.

"I am sorry, my dear Ellinor, that we must part. I shall take Cecilia to the sea, and let this house have a thorough airing."

He could afford to quarrel with her now, he was not deposed—a reprieve was given. The letter announced the birth of a daughter.

"I think you will find the sea very unwholesome for her, Robert; and when I am gone, there will be no one to see that she is quiet and kept free from annoyances. I had better take Edward and his nurse with me to our cottage in Cornwall, if we really find it necessary to leave Rollinston."

"It is absolutely necessary, Ellinor; I shall wish the house cleared by Monday; this is Wednesday. I should have thought you were thoroughly aware that Edward and his mother are not to be separated by fingers of mortal mould, or wishes of human lips. Good-bye. I am obliged to leave home for a few days, and may be prevented returning in time to say so. Thank you for all your care. Trevor, have a cigar?"



CHAPTER XXII.

IN WHICH AN INNOCENT DOVE MAKES A COMPACT WITH A WORLDLY-WISE RAVEN.

THE elation of Sir Robert's spirits may be judged by the daring intrepidity with which he made this polite offer to Mr. Trevor. In his present state of hilarity, he was ready to laugh when he recalled Mr. Trevor's pale look of amazement, and Mrs. Trevor's indignant flush of disgust.

It would have fared but indifferently with Sir Robert had he been called upon to give up the Rollinston estates this year. An unlucky bet or two had made a hole in the next year's receipts, and the expensive luxuries necessary for Lady Fane, during her long and harassing illness, were a great pull upon a purse already almost empty.

"I really thought I should have to accept that offer of consul in one of the colonies, leaving my wife and her brat to be taken care of by her own people. And I fancy cutting my throat would be more judicious, and save me a vast quantity of un-

necessary vexation and trouble—at least from all I can learn of the pleasures of life out there. This narrow escape must really be a warning to me. As that—(here we will not quote Sir Robert's words, merely saying who the person he designated in language we refrain from using was)—Mrs. Trevor does not go to Asheton, I shall take Cecilia there, and get them to keep her and the boy for three months, under pretence of papering and painting this house. I must retrench somehow. If I could save a couple of thousands, and have a little bit of luck with it, I might not care for the birth of this boy,—for a boy they will have, I'll stake my right hand against my left, sooner or later.

"Fool that I was not to begin at once. I made an ass of myself thinking that jealous girl would cause mischief between them somehow. Yet it rarely fails. Once a woman makes up her mind to do evil, she goes ding-dong at it until 'tis done, and I'll bet a cool hundred Miss Beatrice Flower never intends to forgive her cousin for usurping her place. I know what I will do—I'll go and stop at Asheton Court with Cecilia for a while, and see if there are hopes of incompatibility of temper, quarrels, separate maintenance. My opinion of Godfrey is, that he would leave his pretty little wife as soon as look at her, if she did anything of which his high mightiness did not approve. So long life to him, and may he be as captious as a two year old filly at starting."

Lady Fane appeared to take a new lease of life in her native air, under the roof in which she was born; and as we have not been there since Rupert's birth, now a fine spirited, independent fellow, nearly two years old, we will see what changes have taken place.

Old Mr. Asheton has become aged, but there is a wonderful calm and serenity in his fine old countenance. From beneath his hoary brows beam eyes yet youthful in their sparkle of pleasure; for Marion is showing him the little new granddaughter, who opens dark eyes upon him in staring unconsciousness.

"See, grandfather, she is a true Asheton—both dark eyes and dark hair."

"If you are pleased, May Flower, I am glad. But do not ask me to love her, my dear, as I do little Rupert."

Mrs. Asheton looked, if anything, younger, while Godfrey was now and then heard to whistle! Sociable, lively, and agreeable, met at all times coming out of the nursery, asking for Marion whenever he did not happen to see her—alas! for Sir Robert,

those ancient and historical characters, Darby and Joan, could never have been on more delightful terms.

But to do him justice, as became a true man of the world, he could not but wish confusion to her enemies and triumph to herself, so lovely was Marion.

She had become a beautiful woman. Graceful she always had been; but now there was a dignity, a self-possession, that no Asheton among them might hope to rival.

Bent upon doing the agreeable to all, with a sort of conviction rising in his mind (upon which he was strongly inclined to make a bet) that Marion would eventually possess a greater influence than Mrs. Trevor, and the natural consequence was, she would use it to much better purpose, Sir Robert spoke thus to Mr. Asheton:—

“Why don’t you have her picture taken with her boy? My dear sir, no painter can ever find two more beautiful subjects. Look at her now, as she holds him up for you to see. He is a splendid fellow, and beautifully got up. I’ll bet anything, Godfrey, it would make an artist’s fortune, such a subject, calling it a ‘Woman’s real Vanity.’ It would take immensely. He is dressed with such care, his curls so artistically arranged, and she all in disorder, with those few rose-leaves scattered in her hair by that young Hercules, and that little white frill round her throat, torn, I think. She cares nothing for her own appearance, only for her boy.”

Mr. Asheton listened delighted; but Godfrey called to Marion—

“Give Rupert to me. I think you are not aware how he has disarranged your dress; some one might call.”

But Rupert liked being in the open air, throwing rose-leaves over his pretty mother, and pouted a disdainful refusal to his commanding papa. Godfrey was about to enforce his order, but Marion had whispered some little word to her boy, and he was already holding out his willing arms to his father.

“They’ll quarrel about that boy some of these days,” thought Sir Robert, “and it will be Godfrey’s fault. He will be discovering he can only rule the boy through the mother, and then there will be a kick-up—and my precious sister-in-law will have her whole hand in the pie. But, I declare, if I had but a few thousands, ready money, just to go on with, I would not care how soon that pretty little thing put me out of my tantalising position, provided she conquers at last, and rules the roast here. I must see if I cannot get Gilbert or Duncombe to make a bet

with me about it. I don't see that I can learn anything more if I remain a month, so I'll e'en be off and enjoy myself."

But before he went, having accidentally encountered Miss Priscilla Flower in one of his walks, he did not disdain to prick her brains regarding the life at Asheton Court.

"I miss your beautiful sister very much; pray, where is she hiding?"

"She is not hiding at all, thank you," said the matter-of-fact Prissy; "she is in Rome, with her relations."

"I hope she is quite well."

"No, I don't think she is well; at least mamma and me don't like her letters. But there is one very good thing, and that is, Julian is quite well now."

"Oh! is he? I did not know you were interested about him."

"I am not at all interested about him, except that he went mad for May, stupid fellow."

"What! since she has been Mrs. Asheton."

"Oh, law! no; how shocking! It took place all at the same time, and Beatrice wanted her to marry Julian, and I wanted her to marry Mr. Asheton. I have almost forgotten all about it now."

"Was Mr. Asheton jealous?"

"I can't say, I am sure; he never told me if he was."

If Sir Robert had asked Prissy what she considered jealousy to be, he would have been edified by her simplicity, at all events.

"And so the count went mad for love of her."

"Yes; wasn't it stupid of him? If he had not been in such a hurry, and so violently in love, perhaps May would have had him."

"I always thought your sister would marry Mr. Asheton; she would have suited him much better."

"Yes, that she would;" and like a pent-up torrent, Prissy's indignation burst forth. "They—I mean young Mr. Asheton and his mother—are not half good enough for May. Beatrice would have made them treat her properly. They think May is only a child, but she is very sensible, and she loves mamma and me, and wouldn't care how often we came to see her."

"Are you then prevented coming to see her?"

"Yes; Mrs. Asheton says only once a week, and we are not to kiss little Rupert; but I always do, and I always will. So there now."

"I honour you very much, Priscilla—allow me to call you so, as we are connexions—and whenever you or Marion require

assistance to assert your rights, call upon me, and I'll stand by you to the last breath."

"Thank you, that I will."

Oh, Prissy, Prissy, take care; you have made a compact with one who is rather like another one down below.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS. TREVOR INTIMATES HER OPINION OF MRS. GODFREY ASHETON.

LADY FANE became so much stronger, that she considered herself no longer an invalid; and she spent some months at Asheton Court with great satisfaction to herself, if not to all the others. There was a doubt about this, owing to her son, whose mischievous propensities were felt more or less by every one. And there was no possibility of correcting him, without entailing upon his mother sufferings that would endanger her health.

Godfrey could now fully enter into all that his sister Ellinor had confided to him of Cecilia's weakness and mismanagement, and, as he suffered, so did her judgment rise higher in his mind. Marion was almost the only person who had any control over the child, and she obtained it more by her power of contributing to his amusement than any other influence; while the boy did not hesitate to express his hatred of little Rupert and his sister, "because," assigned he, "if they were dead, you would have no one to take you away from me—you should tell me stories every day, and mend my whips." Marion shuddered as she heard him.

It was therefore a relief to both Godfrey and Marion when Lady Fane declared that she would go to Bath for a couple of months; the change would quite set her up for winter. And it was with equal joy that Godfrey received a letter from his sister Ellinor, saying that she would come to take her place.

She did not say, what was now the case, that want of funds retarded the completion of Trevor Castle for the winter, and the longer she could house herself and her family in comfortable quarters the better.

The whole family came; and it was with almost unaccountable delight that Godfrey showed the person whom he loved

nearly the best, and whose good opinion certainly he valued the most in the world, his two beautiful children.

Mrs. Trevor was very sincere in her admiration of them. Also she was in a subdued and rather meek mood, for she had been most glaringly wrong in one or two matters concerning Trevor Castle, which, had her husband possessed the spirit of a half-drowned kitten, he would have taken instant note thereof, to his own and his daughters' manifest advantage. But he let slip the golden opportunity.

Further, she could not but be pleased and softened by her parents' delight in welcoming her back to her old home, so opportunely too, for, low be it spoken, the Trevors were in high danger of having nothing but the roofless walls of Trevor Castle to inhabit.

There was but one thing that discomposed her, namely, the increased beauty and the dignified composure of Marion. No longer blushing, timid, and girlish, she looked what she was, the future mistress of Asheton Court, the mother of Asheton babies; and magnificent children they were.

The Miss Trevors were shooting up into little sorts of spills of girls, white, meek, and mild, without a ray of animation between them. But if they were dull, still they were not mischievous; and if they did not appear as clever as Ellinor's children ought to be, it was because they bore a greater resemblance, mentally and bodily, to their father, than to their mother. They shone with a reflected light, caused by the dazzle of Master Fane's disappearance, everybody sending pop-guns of joy after him, as he faded from sight. Thus they entered upon the Asheton arena with a popularity not their own, but which served them just as well, if not better, as it was through no fault of theirs if they lost it. And as time went on, and they discovered how unlike little Rupert was to Edward in every way, they thawed into a sort of love for the noble boy that was little short of that they felt towards each other.

Meantime, Godfrey and his sister Ellinor once more took from their shelves the long neglected books on education. Once more they plunged themselves into all the delights of parental solicitude, with this advantage, that they could talk over the matter to their hearts' content, instead of being restricted to writing them on paper.

"Marion is wonderfully improved in looks, my dear Godfrey; she does great credit to your training, both in manners and

appearance. Have you been able to supply the deficiencies of her education yet?"

No, I fear not. Her time has been otherwise occupied; there is scarcely eighteen months between Rupert and his sister."

"I presume she is quick naturally in learning; I picked up a great deal of my knowledge literally from love of it, for, you know, our governess was a most stupid old woman."

"Education is very different now from what it was in our time, Ellinor. If we would keep pace with all the advantages hurled by the democratic party on the rabble, we must give our children an education that formerly was bestowed on none but the most talented.

"And therefore that is only to be obtained abroad. Do you still adhere to that idea, Godfrey?"

"I do; yet I cannot see how I shall ever accomplish it. My father and mother never will consent to such a change; and to separate myself and family from them would not only be an injudicious plan, but one of positive cruelty to them."

"I see a great change in my father, Godfrey; he is so feeble, so dependent upon my mother and Marion."

"It is true. Even if my pretty Marion may not be wholly the companion I might have wished, after having had you, my Ellinor, as such, never could I have given my father and mother a daughter so suited to them, so really loved."

"I should not have alluded to my father's state, had I not seen this. We are at present not so welcome to him as the lively Marion and her fine boy. I mean, my dear brother, that my father's mind is failing him."

"You are a better judge than I am, Ellinor, not having seen him for so long. But that is an additional reason against my leaving him."

"You will find, Godfrey, that in another year Marion's society will be enough for him. It is of consequence that so intelligent a child as Rupert should learn the modern languages in the same ratio that he does his own. We shall be going abroad ourselves about that time, while Trevor Castle is drying. I trust my dearest wish will be fulfilled, and that you and your son will be our companions."

"Can I separate Marion from her child?"

"I think it will be for his benefit. I perceive that she has in reality more influence over him than you have."

"You have noticed this."

"Most truly, the very first moment I saw you altogether."

Oh, Godfrey Asheton, spurn from you so base a thought! Jealous of the mother of your child! Fie. Think of her pretty ways, her fond upbraidings to the boy if he forgets his papa, if he does not obey papa, if he does not love him, run to him, think of him as first, best and dearest. It's true she does all this, but where the need to teach him, and whose fault is it that he requires to be told? Not hers, oh, not hers! If fault there is, it lies with yourself.

"Your little girl will be a complete Asheton, I can foresee; you will have very little trouble with her. But Rupert has his mother's eyes. There is a little touch of indecision about them. Mrs. Flower has the same."

"I beg your pardon, Ellinor, you forget there is nothing but connexionship between Marion and her aunt."

"Ah, true; but the fact is, I have never forgotten Marion's extraordinary interference about my girls, shortly after she married. I have lost the remembrance of Mrs. Flower's peering and inquisitive face, from whom, I suppose, she caught the infection."

"Marion, if I remember rightly, was duly cautioned after Rupert's birth; and my mother has, finding hints of no use, restricted Mrs. Flower's visits here. She is a good-natured woman, I allow, and bears no malice. But since Beatrice Flower went to Italy, we have seen very little of them."

"I think you are wise, on account of the children. I am sorry to miss Beatrice. I looked forward to perfecting myself in Italian with her, preparatory to next year. She is indeed one whose friendship I prize, of whom I could make a sister."

"Ah, Ellinor, think not to put me out of conceit with my Marion. There is no one that ever I have seen to equal her. And if she is not accomplished, she is singularly intelligent, and the fondest little mother possible."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MRS. GODFREY ASHETON MAKES COMMENTARIES UPON MRS. TREVOR.

To Lady Gordon, of Glenalt.

MY DEAREST SISTER,

I wanted but a letter from you to make me quite happy. That is, the letter I received stating that you are now well and comfortable. Tell me, sister, is nothing ever to occur, by which I may think of you as happy as I am myself? I require but that one thing to believe that God has showered on me all the blessings that He has promised "to the third and fourth generation of those who loved Him." For we can look back, and tracing the deeds of those who have gone before, take this promise as our right. At least so would I think, but for your fate. Forgive me, dearest Kythe, I know this is a forbidden subject, but I must think of you sometimes, and when I am most happy, then do you rise before me—like nothing else this world can show me. My grandfather loves to hear me talk of you, and Godfrey is really anxious to know you. Say, if we travelled down so far, could we come and see you? Ah, sister, I would leave my darlings for weeks, if I might spend but one day with you. In you have I concentrated all the affections of the past, and though as year by year God gives me other loves to take the vacant places, I feel all the more strongly that nothing can obliterate the first. Nay, more sacred, more true, more strong are all my feelings now, because the dead and the living are so mingled together.

I wish you could see my boy. The little wayward tempers of childhood are but pretty graces in him, leading the way to such sweet little frank confessions of "Me a wrong boy dis time." "Rupert, not Rupert Asheton, but Rupert bad." "Me all over love for papa." "Mamma, Rupert love for pale girls, and take care of them."

These are the two little Trevor girls. I think I told you that Lady Fane left us, three weeks ago, with her son—oh, such a naughty boy. And the Trevors have come in their places for an indefinite time. Godfrey is pleased, Ellinor is his favourite

sister. But to you I may say anything; you will not think, sister, that I would pass judgment upon others but for the benefit of your advice; you will tell me how far I may go, and no further. I think that the fault of the family of the Ashetons is, that they have not mixed enough with the world. They have no standard by which to judge each other, save by each other. Mrs. Trevor has this fault more than all. She does not know, or hear, or see anything but Ashetons. She makes it a religion to worship them, to which all other religions must give way. Are you not sorry for her, sister? In an hour of grief, calamity, sudden sadness, can Ashetons comfort her as "He who holds the heavens in His hand?"

I must tell you how I discovered that she knows not yet "the love of the Saviour."

My grandfather told me always to do for him what I did for our grandfather; and when he knew that I daily read to him the Psalms and Lessons, also I was to read them to him. Mrs. Trevor said she now could tell why her father was more aged and worn than she expected—I was but a gloomy companion to him. Dear grandfather, he placed his hand on my head, and said to her—"I thank God every day of my life for the gift of my May Flower." This did not please her either, and I could not but think she had reason, for Godfrey has told me she was the most beloved and valued of all in the house.

Lady Fane is sweet-tempered. Dearest sister, when you pray, think of her. She is shadowy and frail—it is known that a sudden shock, a rude wind, a trifling accident, might end her life; yet does she live as if death and she were never to meet. Except that, judging of her mother's heart by my own, she clings all the more to that wayward naughty boy, because she feels she may have to leave him suddenly; and it was this that made me excuse her so, for this did I try to win the heart of the boy, for this would I have you pray for her.

But I have not told you of my little Issa, a true Asheton—tho' but nine months old, already a little queen. I am glad I did not call her after our mother, as they kindly wished me. She would not realise her fair, elfin frame. But she is already not unlike Mrs. Asheton, and will do credit to her stately name of Isabel.

I wish our children could meet. I think a little world of childish hearts and tempers is a fit beginning for the arena of the greater world. Five have you now, Kythe, and yet leave me to learn of this last one through the newspaper. Oh, sister,

do I weary you with my little nursery tales, so that you will not tell me yours? or so much, that the blessing of another little loving heart is given you, and I am not to know it?

Again, forgive me, sister. In my love for my own, I dote on your children.

You wish to hear more of my nice, dear Prissy. Prissy is in love, but harmlessly so, because it is with two people—Rupert and Sir Robert Fane. When Prissy is full of a subject she can talk of nothing else. Rupert says, “I tiss my hand to you, Prissy,” then she can think and talk only of his pretty lordly air and lovely face. Mention Sir Robert Fane, and she again is lost in summing up all he said to her, how he looked, in what he was dressed. I like Sir Robert, too. He reminds me of those I used to meet long, long ago. A courteous man of the world, I should say, ready to talk upon any subject, always a gentleman, but I feel embarrassed sometimes; his eyes are very searching. I think he knows, ere you speak, what you are about to say. I think he is not quite happy. He has a perplexed look. If I have a second son, he loses a large fortune. I hope I may not—I like not to be happy at the expense of others. Unless indeed, Godfrey, always liberal, nobly generous, would give his sister—but that will not be the same. Indeed, I feel always a little uncomfortable when he is here.

Our Aunt Flower is well, as usual overwhelmed with parish business, and our uncle emersed in his sermons. I wonder at the difference between him and our father; all energy, all intelligence, all active kindness the one; utter inanition the other, except in the pulpit. Mr. Trevor also “irks” me, sister, as you say in Scotland. He does nothing, is nothing, but I am fain to allow it is better that he is so, than encouraging his daughters to be deceitful towards their mother. Mindful of their want of strengthening food the last time they were here, I gave our good Cummins a hint, and they scarcely visit Rupert in his nursery without some little treat, at which the dear boy is so delighted to act the hospitable host, aping his dear father in everything.

Ah, sister, how good is God to me! I have so much to love now. Such a holy work to do, in training up my boy to be like his father, and yet one thing more that he lacks, and yet only to you would I allow that my Godfrey forgets that all are the same in the eyes of God, rich and poor, one with another, even penitent and sinner. I shall try that my boy may go to one of the great public schools, also that he may mix much with his

neighbours and all around us here. Mrs. Trevor will influence Godfrey the other way, but I shall hope and trust. The citadel of prejudice is, I know, strong, but the prayers of a mother for her child are stronger. Last night, after dinner, we had an argument concerning my Aunt Flower, who had been that day to pay her usual weekly visit. And how much I love her, Kythe, for taking so pleasantly, with such good-humour, the somewhat haughty courtesy of this house. To me, she appears always as the one who will eventually be placed in the higher seat in our Father's mansion, especially when Mrs. Trevor said—

"You shall not encourage Mrs. Flower's visits here, Godfrey; it will hereafter be impossible for your children to break through the connexion."

"And why should they?" asked my kind grandfather. "I am always heartily pleased to see good, cheerful Mrs. Flower."

"She is so unrefined, so utterly deficient in all those graces and accomplishments that Godfrey and I think it necessary our children should only see."

"She is Marion's aunt," remarked Mrs. Asheton, in a low voice of reproof.

"The more reason," answered Ellinor, "that she should be kept at a distance."

"I seem to feel now as if I loved to see a little heartiness in people, especially one's neighbours, and less etiquette," said my grandfather.

"I have not now to learn that my opinions and wishes begin to be of little use, where they were before valued and demanded," said Ellinor. A painful pause followed this speech, sister. Dearest, best sister, I must gossip to you no longer.

Your fond

MAY.

CHAPTER XXV.

MASTER RUPERT ASHETON TAKES GREAT LIBERTIES WITH THE MISS TREVORS, AT WHICH THEY ARE NOT SO DISPLEASED AS THEIR MOTHER.

"AND pray who is this Lady Gordon to whom I see a large closely-written letter sent every week?" asked Mrs. Trevor.

"She is Marion's sister," answered Godfrey.

"Do you ever see the letters? I suppose they require some supervision, even to her sister."

"Oh, no, my dear Ellinor," exclaimed Godfrey.

"Oh, pray say no more, it is a mistake of mine," interrupted Mrs. Trevor, fearing she had gone too far. "Beatrice told me she had always to look over her letters, to correct the spelling."

"A complete mistake indeed. Marion writes a beautiful hand, and has a pure and almost original diction, which is much superior to the boarding-school letters of most young ladies."

"Then you see the letters?"

"No, not to her sister."

"Is that quite safe? Have you ever seen this Lady Gordon? Can she be trusted not to retail all the gossip that Marion is sure to write to her?"

"Some inexplicable cause prevents her leaving home, or giving Marion the slightest hope that she and her husband can ever accept the different invitations we have sent them. I have a letter of hers here in my desk. In everything, it proves that our loss is great in not knowing her."

"Beautiful handwriting, very nicely expressed," commented Mrs. Trevor, as she read the letter. "Excellently well insinuated, that remark about Marion's happiness being so dependent on those she loved. It shows that she is aware, as well as ourselves, of her want of character. Kythe Gordon, Kythe—very odd name, singular, and extremely uncommon. Why did you not call your daughter Kythe, Godfrey? I think it a well-sounding name."

"It was given to Lady Gordon under singular circumstances by her godmother, and a condition was attached to the giving of it, which was to prevent any of her own family ever using it. It is remarkable that Lady Gordon has married into the very family that owns the name, and has restored to it the bequest of her godmother, which she could only hold as a Kythe Gordon. Thus she was called Kythe Gordon Flower—now she is Kythe Gordon Gordon, and her godmother's money has returned to the proper family."

"That seems singular. Why should it have been left away?"

"One might almost imagine there is some secret curse belonging to that family, as it was dying out for want of heirs; the last one, the present Sir Alan, having, it is said, been enjoined by his father never to marry. Thus they were seeking for old and dear friends on whom to bestow the wealth that

would eventually fall to the crown. The beauty of Miss Flower proved too strong for Sir Alan to keep the promise made to his father, but I fear he suffers for breaking it. They are, though strongly attached, not happy."

"Very strange indeed. I should go down to Scotland, if I was you, Godfrey, and visit them some day."

"We have offered to do so, but a convenient time has not yet occurred. The sisters are greatly attached to each other, though they have only been together for eight months in their whole lives."

"I have had a very pleasant letter to-day from Sark, our architect. He felt sure that the mining agent was withholding our just dues from the mine. Therefore he has employed the last month in going over all the works, his services at the Castle being needless at present, and he has discovered a new seam, which he confidently expects will double our income. In another month he will be able to speak for a certainty, as at present there is a good deal of water to be pumped out. I must consequently make the most of your society, my dear brother. I may have it but for one short month more."

"Indeed! Then I will at once proceed to write out our plan of education. Even if I cannot carry it out, it will be of use to refer to."

But Mrs. Trevor, though her visit began in a sort of calm, did not intend it should end so. She had put some little restraint upon herself, because, not knowing for how many months she might require the use of Asheton Court, she acknowledged to herself it would be injudicious to quarrel with her present desirable quarters. She knew, if dissensions arose, that it would be she who would have to leave, and not Marion, consequently, self-interest keeping her quiet (though she felt boiling over with indignation once or twice), the moment the necessity for restraint was over, she indemnified herself. It is especially easy to find fault when there is the determination to do so, with or without provocation.

Cummins, the nurse, was an object of great displeasure to Mrs. Trevor.

Not only had she been heard pitying the little half-starved Miss Trevors, but she was indifferent to all Mrs. Trevor's remarks upon her faulty management and ill-conducted nursery arrangements. Certainly, great regularity in their meals was exercised, but Rupert never asked for milk, cake, or fruit, that some was not given him, in the intermediate time. To be sure,

it was not much; even little Issa was allowed milk if she chose.

Strongly did Mrs. Trevor reprobate this plan, but Cummins had only to show her healthy children in answer. Mrs. Trevor had the disagreeable feelings of knowing that Cummins listened to her most respectfully, but nothing more, and that with every disposition to find fault, there was nothing tangible to mention to Godfrey. Yet what a hold she would have over Marion, what ample revenge she could give herself for Marion's early interference with her daughters, if she could but obtain the dismissal of Cummins, and put a nurse of her own choosing in her place. It must be done somehow.

But time was going on; Cummins was more respectful than ever, and yet had her own way under Mrs. Trevor's very nose. One day, attracted by an unusual commotion in the nursery, which was over her mother's sitting-room, Mrs. Trevor ran up stairs.

There did she behold, seated upon an improvised war-chariot, composed of his own particular chair reversed, with a gay-coloured shawl as hammercloth, Master Asheton. In one hand, a new whip, given him but the day before by his grandfather, which he was cracking with most evident delight, while, in the other, he held long reins of pink tape, attached to the mouths of two prancing war-horses, who were kicking and capering on all fours at each vehement command, as well as whip cracks, of the delighted boy. Alas, for those prancing steeds! Who before had ever seen the Miss Trevors in such a degraded, unlady-like position?

Save the young Jehu, all looked aghast.

"Are those the Miss Trevors?" said their affectionate mother, in a slow cutting voice they knew but too well.

"Master Asheton is such a rumbustical fellow," said Cummins, wishing to excuse the alarmed girls; "he'll drive his own legs, if he can get nothing else."

"Go to your rooms," said Mrs. Trevor to her daughters. "As for you," (turning to the nurse) "make preparations to leave the house. My brother will never suffer a person who could see young ladies demean themselves in such a manner, before her own eyes, to remain as superintendent of his children."

"Nay, ma'am," urged Cummins, "children will be children; you was young once yourself."

"Good heavens! do you know to whom you are speaking?"

"Surely, ma'am. Here, Master Asheton, come here, sir, and make your bow to your aunt, and say you are sorry you have displeased her."

Mrs. Trevor turned and left the room, without deigning to look at nurse or boy, and went straight with her tale to Godfrey, where, thinking that Ashetons were at liberty to say what they liked, whether true or not, she gave such a colouring to her story, that it seemed to take him but two lordly strides to enter the nursery.

There and then, the good Cummins received her *congé*, with a long exordium to boot, upon the exceeding impropriety of her conduct. She listened in respectful silence, until her master was fairly reduced to a nonplus for words, and then said quietly,—

"Pray, sir, allow me to call upon those who were present, to say if either my words or manner were such as you describe."

"You forget yourself, Mrs. Cummins," said Godfrey, haughtily, "I require no witnesses when Mrs. Trevor has spoken."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the nurse; "my character is more valuable to me than Mrs. Trevor's can be to her, for I have to gain my bread by it. You have been a kind and just master to me, and you cannot refuse me an opportunity of righting myself."

"I can have no objection to you making any apology you choose, and I have no doubt Mrs. Trevor will accept of it."

"Sir, not having been either disrespectful or impertinent to Mrs. Trevor, I have no apology to make; I merely want justice."

At this moment Marion hastily entered the room. "Godfrey, this is not true—surely Cummins is not to go?"

"Hush, Marion. This is not the place in which to discuss this subject."

"But our children," murmured Marion; "Cummins is so good a nurse, we shall never get such another, they are so attached to her."

"Cease, pray," said Godfrey, sternly; "you entirely forget your position."

"I think only of the children. Who will take the care of them that Cummins does?" said Marion, beseechingly.

"I have already said, that if Mrs. Trevor is willing to receive an apology, I shall look over the offence for this time."

"But, nurse, it is a mistake," said Marion, anxiously; "surely you were neither impertinent nor uncivil?"

"No, indeed, ma'am; neither the one or the other; so, not even to oblige you, can I apologize."

Godfrey left the room, the dark flush of anger spreading over his face, while Marion's tears rose to her eyes. She knew full well Mrs. Trevor would not even have accepted an apology, had nurse been inclined to give one.

"Come, dear ma'am, don't take on; there are many nurses besides me, and very few that would not do their duty by you and the sweet children. Come, come, dear young lady, may you never have a worse sorrow than to part with a faithful servant."

Marion's heart sunk within her.



CHAPTER XXVI.

MRS. TREVOR AND HER NEPHEW RUPERT HAVE THEIR FIRST QUARREL.

BUT Godfrey and Mrs. Trevor were not to lord it thus, without very vehement marks of disapprobation from some of the inhabitants of the Court.

The oldest and the youngest Asheton in the house raised up their voices in open rebellion; for Marion's fears had not belied her. Nurse might have strung apologies as thick as blackberries on a hedge to offer the offended lady, yet fail to regain a remittance of her sentence; especially when Mrs. Trevor discovered that her father was as vehement in his displeasure as Master Rupert was uproarious in his, at the dismissal of their joint favourite.

Never before had Mr. Asheton been heard to express disapprobation of his daughter Ellinor; but now, had nurse really insulted her, had she even raised her hand against a daughter of the house, the fond old grandfather would have considered any course better than that the beautiful healthy children should lose their nurse, who took such pride in them.

Mrs. Trevor's heart swelled higher and higher as she heard her father's open remarks.

"It was all nonsense, he did not believe nurse could be uncivil if she tried; and if she had been so, Godfrey ought to look over it, rather than allow little Rupert to roar and cry in that dangerous manner."

She must triumph, or farewell to any influence for the future ; so taking advantage of her father's daily drive with Marion, she urged Godfrey to dismiss Cummins at once, to avoid further words.

But Rupert was rather too intelligent for her.

"How dare you be so naughty," she said to the baby boy, as—hearing the order for nurse's departure—he began struggling into his coat, the wrong side before, his hat nearly in the same predicament, with the string flopping over his nose, adding to his irritation.

"Go away, go away, ugly woman!" said Rupert; "me go with nurse—go, go, oh, you ugly, ugly." His face of disgust, and his pointed finger, were more expressive than his words.

Mrs. Trevor called his father, giving him, as they ascended to the nursery together, her ideas of the language his son had used, and the source from which it had undoubtedly sprung.

"Rupert, how is this?" said his father, as if the boy was eight or ten years old. For neither he nor his sister, to do them justice, knew exactly how to treat anything smaller.

"Go, go, ugly aunt!" answered Rupert, as he saw Mrs. Trevor.

"For shame, sir," said his father, sternly; "who taught you such language?"

Rupert was silent. The passionate love of his father for him had never shown itself in this form before. But, with the trusting nature of childhood, he threw himself into his father's arms, and said—

"Aunt did; she make Rupert angry."

Godfrey was posed for a moment.

"But you must not say such words to your aunt—it is very naughty."

"Why she send my nurse away?—not her nursey."

And the air with which he said it, so haughty and indignant, was so truly Ashetonian, his father clasped him closer to his heart.

"But you are an Asheton, and are to be a gentleman; you must tell your aunt you are sorry."

"Me won't."

"Rupert, I am ashamed of you."

"Rupert 'shamed of aunt," said the young delinquent, sulkily.

"You must say you are sorry."

Perhaps if Godfrey had known more of children, he would not

have entered so hastily into this quarrel with his son. What parent has not experienced the pain of the first struggle for power? The younger the little obstinate mind is, the more it holds with the tenacity of instinct to the determination to have its own way. Reason has not yet had time to dawn upon the intellect; and while the parent wearies and mourns over what, being so plain to him, seems but additional perverseness on the part of the child, a turning from the subject, a new object, any slight cause would divert the little mind, and end the matter happily.

But with some parents such a course would be deemed an infringement of their duty. The first sign of the "original man" showing itself in their child must be crushed, no matter how painful (and, generally, much more painful to the parent) the operation; if it causes weeks of estrangement, fits of passion and sulks, nay, if it ends even in illness, the parent must conquer, the child must be conquered. God forbid that any words in these pages should tend to encourage the spoiling of children! Already, in this age, it may be remarked (*en passant*), ruling a great deal more than they ought, and brought forward on occasions when they should be asleep, as well as kept in their proper place—the nursery. How otherwise is the self-sufficiency of the present rising generation to be accounted for, but that from the cradle they began to experience the delightful fact, their weal or woe causes shade or sunshine to pervade their dwelling. When fully developed, experienced heads cannot withstand the flattering idea that they are necessary to somebody's happiness, how can little weak heads hope to escape?

But to return. Woe betide that conscientious good parent who thinks it necessary, for his child's welfare, to do battle with the evil spirit within him too early. Rather let him temporise the matter until, with reason on his side, and the perception of his parent's real love as well, the little obstinate being yields with a good grace. It is only when too young to have any perception but that he must have his own way, that these painful scenes between parent and baby take place.

It is better to ward them off.

It is better to soften than rouse the evil that dwells within us.

Doth God deal hardly by us? No; by the bonds of pitiful mercy, by the paths of gentle persuasion, He leads us on, until, through grace, we find ourselves in the open ground of reason and judgment, and, unbiassed, are free to choose either of the paths now before us.

The end of all this dissertation is, that Master Rupert was obstinate, and his father on the horns of a dilemma.

Beating was out of the question, for two reasons; he was a baby and an Asheton. The first caused by his being too little, the second, from being too great. Into such anomalies do people fling themselves when they elevate their pigmy frames above other pigmies. Rupert exemplified, through his father's inability to determine his precise station in life, the somewhat extraordinary mixture of a Lilliputian in one respect, and an inhabitant of Brobdingnag (both metaphorically) in another. Mrs. Trevor certainly would have liked to have had the whipping of him (we use the words that, as a privileged author, we know she thought, but did not speak); but she was not yet so far gone in "Passion's maddening path" as to dare to hint thereat.

After an hour's fruitless warfare, she recommended him to be confined to one corner of the room, barricaded therein by a table; and though the barricade proved of little avail, for on the instant he emerged from beneath, yet she was fain to leave him only guarded by his own honour, which had led him to march into another corner, of his entire free will; from out of which he sulkily frowned on her, but gave great sobs as he looked at his father.

Godfrey could not endure the trial further, and hearing the carriage driving up, he went downstairs to tell his tale, followed by Mrs. Trevor. Most indignant was she as her father loudly and angrily upbraided both. "Dear grandfather," whispered Marion, "he must do as he is bid. I may go to him, Godfrey?"

Though Mrs. Trevor said no, Godfrey was too glad to let her go. Shocked was she to see his lovely face all swollen and angry, his hair all disordered.

Smoothing his beautiful curls, and speaking little soft motherly words, she took him up in her arms. Mrs. Trevor and Godfrey followed her.

The child did not see them, but feeling in his mother's clasp, and looking up into her loving eyes, his little overburdened heart began to sob out its relief.

"Mamma, mamma, love Rupert."

"Mamma loves you, my darling."

"Nursey gone, mamma?"

"I know, dear; but papa is here, and mamma, and baby sister."

"Why nursey leave me?"

"Perhaps another little boy wanted her."

"Rupert is sleepy, very."

"Then sleep, dear; but first say your prayers."

He lisped out the simple prayer, and when he came to the last words, "Make Rupert a good boy," he stole a look at his mother's face.

"Rupert must do as his papa bids him, before he is a good boy."

"Rupert won't."

"Then he must go to sleep without God's blessing, or papa's kiss."

"Me love papa."

"No, Rupert loves himself best."

Marion raised him, so that he saw both his father and aunt.

"Papa, papa," said the child, holding out his arms.

"Don't take him," said Mrs. Trevor, "on any account, until he has apologized."

But the young mother had laid her child in its father's arms, and the little rosy mouth was placed upon his so confidently, that Godfrey returned the kiss right lovingly.

"Rupert loves papa," said Marion.

"Yes, yes," said the eager child.

"Then he will do what papa wishes," said the gentle pleading mother.

Rupert looked at his aunt dubiously, then at his father's face, where the radiant smile that had stolen Marion's heart was beaming.

"I sorry," said he, with a little lordly air, waving his hand in an inimitable manner towards his aunt, then with a burst of delight, as if his little heart was relieved from a weight, he threw his arms round his father's neck, and laughed with pleasure.

"A remarkable change, indeed," said Mrs. Trevor; "just now we were all sulks and sullen, and now we are noisy and gay."

"He knows no better, he is so young, Ellinor," said Marion.

"He is quite old enough to know that he has been very naughty, and such mirth is very unseemly; and if I were you, Godfrey, I would still have him well punished."

"No, no," said the fond father, only too happy to escape any more battles with his idolized darling. "He is sleepy now, and must go to bed. Is it not so, my boy?"

"Yes. God bless Rupert, and make him a good boy."

No wonder that Marion, in her heart of hearts, thought that

never mother had such a child ; while Godfrey, if he could not quite enter into the beauty of the child's character, thus breaking forth in the incidents of the day, yet congratulated himself upon his extraordinary intellect and understanding, which were indeed great.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MRS. TREVOR GETS HER OWN WAY, AND AS IT SOMETIMES HAPPENS,
IS MUCH DISGUSTED THEREAT.

NOTWITHSTANDING the assurance from Marion that her boy was now happy, kissed, forgiven, and sent to sleep off his unwonted troubles, Mr. Asheton was anything but appeased.

"I have sent for Cummins back again," said he. "I have sent my own carriage ; I am master of this house ; I will allow of no interference, Ellinor ; little Rupert shall have all his own way as long as I live."

This he had the satisfaction of repeating over and over again, no one contradicting him, for Godfrey was too sorry to see how much he had discomposed his father, and Mrs. Trevor could not have borne it at all, had she not calmed herself with the idea that her father's mind was greatly impaired.

By the time dinner was over, a judicious forgetfulness has fallen on the whole party ; and on the appearance of Rupert at dessert, more beautiful and intelligent than ever, for his long sleep had coloured his cheeks, brightened his eyes, and rendered him unusually lively, his grandfather was prepared to forgive and forget everything, which is not a singular feeling when one has had one's own way. A decided redness about the eyes and noses of the Miss Trevors, might have suggested to a spectator, unaware of the habits of the family, that something disagreeable had occurred, but nothing more.

And even suppose they had suffered, did not little Rupert insist that they should taste his wine, eat his cake, have each an orange (grandfather was bent upon his having all his own way), and did not the little girls whisper to each other, at night, the only time they could interchange sentiments, what a little dar-

ling he was, to try and make up to them, for all they had suffered, so unlike Edward, so like dear Aunt May?

And was ever anything like grandpapa, the next day giving them each a golden guinea in the most clandestine manner, when no one was near, because they made such good prancing steeds in dear little Rupert's war-chariot. Poor Marion, if she had heard of Mr. Asheton's bribery and corruption, would have been obliged to class him in the same category as Mr. Trevor, a promoter of deceit, a deviser of lies. Fortunately for all parties, the mooted question of Mrs. Cummins was arranged by an extraneous party. That worthy nurse confided to her mistress, that it was better on all accounts that she should leave, which Marion was loath to allow, even though she felt the justice of Cummins's remark.

"But, dear ma'am, if no one has any objection, I need not go far, for Mr. Clifton, the head gardener, has been urging me very often, only I could not bear to leave the children; but it is very handy to be so near. Night and day I should be always ready. Mrs. Trevor will never forgive you, ma'am, if I stay; master will always look unkindly; I respect and honour master, love you, ma'am, dote on the dear children, couldn't never go out to service again, after nursing Master and Miss Asheton. Hope, dear ma'am, would think it was best. She married Mr. Clifton."

Marion and Godfrey were both gratified by this arrangement. Mr. Asheton was suspicious as to some bribery having been used—Mrs. Asheton was pleased and not pleased.

Pleased that so excellent a nurse should remain at hand, displeased that so disrespectful a servant should be thus rewarded; she took her daughter's side.

Mrs. Trevor, of course, was disgusted.

Master Rupert shared in this feeling with his aunt, strange to say, but from a different motive. Nothing but the fear of another "corner day" prevented me from calling the amiable, love-sick, bass-scented Clifton his only vituperative word, "ugly, ugly."

However, promises of constant teas, and feasts of strawberries and cream in the garden-house, went a great way towards reconciling him, while the sacred contract that was made, undertaking that Clifton was never to be invited to them, helped still further.

Meantime, he derived a great deal of amusement in the preparations for the wedding; and as his grandpapa set no bounds

to his presents, in the plenishing and setting forth the garden-house, and Master Rupert was his medium for bestowing them, the eventual departure of his nurse was completely lost sight of in the delight of helping her to go. Though, to outward appearances, all was forgotten on Mrs. Trevor's part, sadly could that mute Diana, still so apparently bent upon hunting, have given testimony to the contrary, were speech among her gifts. And still more sad was it to see a man, a father, a husband lending his ear to insidious whispers, that had no better emanation than the weak querulous follies of a jealous woman.

How often is it the case that a contracted circle of friends, a limited routine of duty, narrows the heart and confines the power of judgment, until habit becomes the rule of one's actions, and not the higher principle of religion and good-fellowship. So long the slave of family prejudices and whims, Godfrey Asheton may be pardoned if he was over-persuaded and fooled by the plausible tongue of one he thought of more favourably than any other person in the world, and who also was decidedly wronged.

Old Mr. Asheton did not mend the matter, for his favourite May Flower and his idolised grandson, by the determination he evinced to hear nothing but what was most excellent, most charming, of both.

"You must suffer me, my dear Godfrey, to lead the way to various opinions on the subject of education, by which you will perceive Marion totally differs from you; and, seeing the extraordinary influence she already possesses over your son, I should be ill doing my duty to you, the most valued of all my earthly affections, if I did not warn you," said Mrs. Trevor.

Thus, evening after evening, was the unwary Marion beguiled into detailing all her hopes and wishes for the future education of her boy; and if in some instances Mrs. Trevor showed the cloven foot, and was somewhat uncourteous in her remarks, Godfrey was silent, the fond grandfather delighted.

But once only did Godfrey remonstrate—it was upon Marion's verdict of a public school.

"Impossible," he exclaimed; "remember the vast variety of characters and persons to be met with in a public school. He might know those with whom you least wished him to associate. No parent is justified in thrusting a young and inexperienced child into a heterogeneous medley of indifferent characters."

"Why we are born, then, as some of the sands on an illimit-

able shore, atoms amongst myriads, but that we may find our level and place among them. If God had designed that we were not each to help the other, why make the world so populous, and his second command so voluminous in its directions?"

"Man, the grown-up, finished man," observed Mrs. Trevor, "ought alone to be trusted in the world. He can then judge whom to choose as friends, and whom to reject."

"But where can he gain his experience, save in the world, of which a public school is the type? From their cradle we can inculcate religion, truth and honour, and send them forth to fight with these, in the battle-field of their duty—the world."

"Absurd, absurd—all words and no sense—specious theory," murmured Mrs. Trevor; "just as wanting in common sense as the arguments you used last night about your aunt Flower."

Mr. Asheton. "I approved of all that May Flower said regarding her aunt Flower. She may be, as you say, Ellinor, unrefined, fussy, inquisitive, but she is the most unselfish person I know—never was a kinder heart. I have learnt several lessons from her; and if, in the near approach of the mighty leveller of us all—Death—I have been led to think more than I ever did before, it occurs to me, who among us proud Ashetons can say that we have mixed as freely and pleasantly among our neighbours, doing them what good we were enabled? Have we not rather thought that, though they might turn to dust and ashes, it would not be so with us? And yet all the difference between us is, that we have held aloof from those created by God in the same mould, gifted with the same gifts—without any other reason for so doing than our own conceits. I misdoubt me but I have harshly judged some of my neighbours for faults that will show lightly against my own sins of pride and omission. Bring up your boy differently, Godfrey. Let him freely mix with all men. His nature is such that he will cull the good and despise the bad."

Mrs. Trevor. "We shall hear then of the Ashetons becoming democrats and every other despicable thing."

Mr. Asheton. "Nay, I would not have all persons turned summarily into the world to pick and choose; but with the clear head and good judgment that our darling will have, the study of his fellow-creatures will educate him."

Godfrey. "I must say, my dear father, your language is so unlike what you formerly used, that I am at a loss to know from whence arises the change."

Mrs. Trevor. "Then I am not. And presuming that my

father does not regard me as wholly witless, I desire he will look at my system of education. In following that out, I never have deviated from one rule. My girls have associated with no human being beyond those with whom they are necessitated to hold intercourse. You will see the result. Forming their opinions from my matured judgment, aided by their father, they will eventually be part of ourselves. We shall have in them companions similar in ideas and opinions, and shall thus be independent of society. Then, no more with every delicate and sensitive feeling outraged by the habits and manners of people, I grieve to say, in the very best society, we shall live calmly; happy in the refined natures about us, with nothing to annoy us, nothing to disgust us, either *outré* or uncongenial. Surely, my dear Godfrey, you enter into my feelings. You must understand me."

Godfrey. "I do, Ellinor, and agree with you also. Such a life as you anticipate with your children, so do I with mine."

Mr. Asheton. "And you, pretty one?"

Marion. "I hope our children will do good in their generation, whether it be to the many or to the few."

Mrs. Trevor. "Surely you do not mean to argue that your children were born for any other purpose than to benefit their parents, and be their pride and happiness?"

Marion. "When their parents gave them life, God gave them souls. They must render them back to Him with the account of their stewardship."

Mrs. Trevor. "I would rather have no children at all, than hold them as such public property. But, my dear child, why I argue with you, I cannot tell. Luckily my brother, with his admirable sense and judgment, is at hand. As long as he is allowed a proper share in the affections of his children, I have little doubt of the result. Like myself, he will reap the reward of his care and attention, and he will need a double portion of both to counteract the effects of their mother's want of wisdom, and their aunt Flower's lack of refinement."

"My dear Mrs. Asheton," said Mr. Asheton, as he folded himself up warm in bed, "when does Ellinor leave us?"

"Next Monday," said his spouse.

"My dear, do you know I think Ellinor is much altered—altered for the worse?"

"I think she is, Mr. Asheton; probably she had a trying time of it with Lady Fauc."

"She seems to me to have grown interfering; and her manner with my little pet May is annoying to me."

"I am afraid she is a little jealous."

"Poor soul! Well, perhaps she is; we were all so fond of her, and now we think of Marion. But still, she should not have interfered with my little supper. I feel much in want of it."

"She was afraid it would make you bilious."

"But I am not bilious; and besides, I have felt much better and stronger since Marion advised me to take it."

"I presume she had heard it was Marion's advice, because when I wanted to ground my new stool in blue, because May advised it, she has made me get brown wool instead, and really the piece I have done looks very ugly. The brown and the yellow don't agree."

"Dear, dear, that is sad; don't do any more of it, but wait until Monday, then pick out the brown, and do it in blue, as May advises."

"I think I will take your advice, Mr. Asheton. And I shall also be glad when those two little girls leave. I cannot be quite certain that they are all Ellinor wishes, and that distresses me."

"Poor little dears, they grow very much, but are sadly thin; I wish they were a little more lively. But young Rupert spoils us for all children, and his sister promises to be just such another, though she has black eyes and hair. Well, good night, my dear Mrs. Asheton, on Monday we shall again be comfortable."

At that very moment Mrs. Trevor was confiding to "dear Trevor" similar sentiments.

"I am delighted Monday is so near; it is bitterly painful to me to perceive my place usurped by a young person, who is only clever in artfulness. This is the second time that she has driven me from my father's house. But let her beware; if I again place myself in such a position, she shall be the sufferer, I the conqueror."

"Of course, dear Ellinor."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN WHICH SIR ROBERT FANE, THOUGH HE HAS SAVED NOTHING, IS YET
BUOYANT IN SPIRITS.

Scene—A DUCAL PALACE.

Present:—Three gentlemen; a billiard-table, books, newspapers, pipes, and cigars.

"DID you ever see any one so down in the mouth as Fane?" says a gentleman with a cigar in his mouth.

"Never," answered another, who was smoking a pipe.

"He made a shocking bad book last Derby," remarked a third, with an unoccupied mouth.

"They tell me he is deuced hard up," began the cigar.

"I wonder if he will have to sell," interrupted the pipe; "I'll have a bid for his brown horse 'Accommodation,' if he touches five hundred. There's not a cleverer horse in the kingdom."

"They tell me he has a wonderful shooting pony, for which he refused sixty guineas, and it is scarcely as high as twelve hands."

"He always was a capital judge of a horse, poor devil, and I shall miss his advice very much."

"I should hardly give him credit for that, seeing he is so unlucky on the turf."

"Don't you see that's the very reason of it? He picks out the best horse, stakes all, and we know (by pretty fair experience, I fancy) it is rarely the best horse that wins."

"It may be as you say. However, as there appears no time to be lost, I shall just put out a feeler about 'Accommodation.' Where has he moped off to, I wonder, since, Tiffin?"

"I saw him in the library, spelling the papers."

"Ha! bad sign; when a man loses his spirits, he always plunges into politics, in the sure hope of finding some one in a worse plight than himself. If he was not too out of condition to whistle, I should conjecture the coming hero was our disconsolate knight."

Enter Sir Robert Fane, whistling, and looking remarkably pleasant.

"Hillo, Fane! Who has left you a thumping legacy, that you have recovered your spirits so wonderfully?"

"A Miss Asheton. I saw it in the paper."

"Is it much?"

"About four thousand a-year. I'll bet you two to one you don't hole the red ball, as often as I do, in half-an-hour."

Scene changes.

Once again Sir Robert had a reprieve; and time rolled on, leaving him more hopeful than ever, more bankrupt in good intentions. Nearly five years had elapsed since Mr. Godfrey Asheton's marriage, and he was still in possession of the Rollinston estates, and safe at all events for another year.

He would make a regular good business of it this year; it should and would be a lucky one to him. It was no fault of his that he could not save. Lady Fane's expenses even doubled his; and if, in her invalid state, she required such constant change of air, and so many useless luxuries, why, her own family must provide them.

Enjoy himself thoroughly he would; for it was out of all reason to suppose that Mrs. Godfrey Asheton would confine herself wholly to perpetuating the female race of Ashetons. He was sick of making bets about it. This year should be his last and merriest. And as for the ensuing ones, they must shift for themselves.

The result of this magnanimous resolution was, that, at the end of this jovial year, there remained to Sir Robert but a modicum of his own patrimony, and a ruinous mortgage on the Rollinston estates; as the percentage was enormous for money lent on such a precarious tenure. "Accommodation" was accommodated with a stall in the stable of Mr. Pipe, and the shooting pony became the property of the cigar. With the sale of some other horses, he found himself possessed of 1400 and some odd pounds for the current expenses of the next year; Rollinston Court alone taking about 3000 a-year to keep it up in the style patronized by Lady Fane.

Something must be done. He would rush down to Asheton Court, discover if there was any likelihood of its being disposed, and if such was the case, throw himself upon his brother-in-law's generosity, promise to become a good boy, and all other fine things; for which he took great credit to himself without reflecting that he intended to become a reformed character rather because he was forced to do so by circumstances than conviction.

No particular change had taken place at Asheton Court, but there were indubitable signs that great ones were impending.

Mr. Asheton himself, on whom Time was laying his hands with visible marks, even month by month, was cheerfully preparing himself, and those around him, for the hour when "they should look for him and see him no more."

The true beauty of a Christian character had only dawned upon him in latest life, but the avidity with which he imbibed its principles spoke the peace and joy it gave him."

One fear only troubled him.

"All the days of the life of my pilgrimage have been so happy, so blest, I know not if my God hath seen aught fit in me to chasten. Has He left me alone in my pride of manhood and lust of self-conceit? How answer you this, May Flower?"

"The wise Preacher saith, 'Prosperity is more dangerous to the soul than adversity.' 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter heaven.' 'He that, being exalted, hath humbled himself, shall be pardoned.'"

"Ha, that will do; that latter text suits me. In that hope will I die."

Mrs. Asheton also began to be feeble and somewhat broken.

But none were so changed as Marion.

Pale, spiritless, shadowy, the bloom of her beautiful womanhood was gone, leaving the touching air of an ever-beseeching pity in her countenance.

An air unheeded, entreating looks unnoticed, the stern Godfrey Asheton pursued his way as if granite composed his thoughts, and iron was their medium of expression.

Standing almost alone in his opinions, now that his sister Ellinor was, as she informed him, driven from the house, he considered it all the more incumbent upon him to be undeviating.

His father's weakened mind, his mother's broken health, Marion's obstinacy, all concurred together to leave to him the task of preserving the faith and creed of the Ashetons untarnished and unbroken.

"Poor little thing," thought Sir Robert, "what a change!" Once again, as he had seen her before, was she holding up a child for its grandfather to kiss.

"Little darling," said the fond old man, "I love her dearly. Nurse showed me her pretty little head this morning, all covered with fair rings of hair that will be long ones like your own, my May, when I am laid in my last home."

"But she has dark eyes, very dark eyes, grandfather."

"True, May Flower; once more Godfrey and Marion are united; it is for this I love the child. May it ever be so."

Again Sir Robert thought.

"Ever be so! What can Godfrey be about that he does not see the change in his wife? I'll bet—no, I am to bet no more. But its odds now who goes first. Grief kills sooner than old age, and her heart is such a sensitive one. He loves her still, after his fashion, but his stern coldness is slaying her. Well, if 'tis his pleasure, who may gainsay him? Not I. She is very fit to make an angel. I am not sure if it would not be kind to wish her one at once. I'll step over to Wood-head, and hear what my little *confidante* thinks."

Miss Flower was there also. "Grown most remarkably plain," thought Sir Robert, which is often the case with your dark beauties, when they allow a few little tempers to sour them. Fair women may be, and look, cross, but a dark one should ever keep sunshine about her, to brighten up the shadows that nature has already planted in her face."

Prissy appeared fat, dull, and somewhat morose. Miss Flower was, what she looked, undeniably cross.

"I find your cousin Marion very much changed," said Sir Robert, after some other conversation.

A gleam of pleasure made Miss Flower handsome again.

"You needn't have taken the trouble to come and tell me that," said Prissy, sharply.

"I beg your pardon," said Sir Robert, courteously, hoping Prissy's temper would overflow in words a little more, but he was disappointed. Mrs. Flower suddenly entered, "An excellent text, my dear girls; most appropriate; I knew we should find one—'Be ye compassionate one towards another.'"

Sir Robert left Asheton Court in very buoyant spirits, upon the whole.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEGINS IN SORROW, AND ENDS IN DEATH.

MARION guarded the life of her kind father-in-law as if her own hung upon the fragile thread. Nay, more than life to her

was bound up in his presence. That one plague-spot, burnt in by the infectious touch of Mrs. Trevor's jealous finger, was spreading. Marion could see it in each look, each word, each gesture of her husband's. But even when most inclined to deprecate his poor judgment of her loving ways, her gentle lessons to her little children, her mother's words, all tending to exalt and honour him as first and dearest in their baby eyes, yet he was Godfrey—her Godfrey—and she murmured not. She bore silently, but not the less bravely, her secret weight of apprehension.

"May Flower, my dear wife has written, at my request, to my children. I would fain see all my children ere I die."

"Oh, grandfather," was all that May could utter.

"Poor child, poor Marion. I wish it may all be well with you when I am gone. You will have to suffer. But remember, May Flower, you are to guard my babies. Do not let my little darlings have to mourn that their mother loved their father more than his children. You must be their safe-guard."

"And if I lose my husband's love?" murmured Marion.

"May Flower, you taught me where to look for comfort, young as you are, and old as I am. Trust in the Lord, my child, I have a good hope within me, all will be well."

As the world will not stand still, and the inhabitants within it progress in evil or good, according to their different propensities, so did the same party, assembled once more, as at Godfrey Asheton's marriage, show the marks of their earthly inheritance.

Mr. and Mrs. Trevor were exaggerated types of their former selves, neither so peculiarly amiable as to lead their friends to felicitate themselves on their progression towards Trevor perfection. Godfrey, we have seen, was more profoundly wrapt up in Asheton prejudices than when, on the first opening of this history, he stigmatized the whole world, and wished himself out of it. Not that he did so now. No; amid all that morbidness, that disgust, that hatred of mankind, he bore the tenderest heart in the world for a few privileged human beings. He doted upon his boy; he was never tired of admiring his little stately Issa; but, in his innermost heart of all, the little baby Mabel had crept, until her image filled it. Never was there seen so coaxing, so imperious, so loving, so exacting a little mortal. Though but two years old, her lisping words were laws—her tiny will a command. Fearless and confiding, if he frowned, she kissed; if he spoke sternly, she laughed. Unlike

their other two children, who deferred to the mother as much as to the father, baby Mabel took possession of that stately father as her own property, and he was content to unbend and be her playfellow, for there was no gainsaying her.

Meantime, it was yet too plain that his mother's words alone coaxed Rupert to be good—that only to her mother would the little turbulent Issa unbend.

Lady Fane, pale and shadowing, with the breath of life struggling within her, lived as if every warm and sunny day would enact a miracle for her, and restore her to sudden strength. In nothing had she prepared for any change—in nothing did she expect to find it. Not even in her ten years old boy, who, still with baby habits, only showed his increase of wisdom by being rather more clever in planning acts of mischief, in which his cousins, the unfortunate Miss Trevors, were his greatest victims.

They appeared, amid the whole party, to be alone stationary.

Trevor Castle was not only still unfinished, but Mr. Sark's golden dreams of a new seam in the mine were only partially realised. That is, his hopes had not been vague, but they had only produced copper at present. This metal did not suffice to continue the building of Trevor Castle according to the magnificent notions with which it was begun. Indeed, it appeared probable that, if finished at all, the Trevors would only have sufficient income left to live in one room. So Mrs. Trevor accepted with much pleasure her mother's invitation to Asheton. It having become a paramount necessity that they should go abroad—really to retrench, ostensibly for the Miss Trevors' education—every possible influence she possessed with her brother should be used to induce him to accompany them. As head of Mr. Asheton's establishment, she would be in her proper place. Without it, she was only one among many luckless individuals hiding their straitened circumstances in foreign lands.

So she came armed at all points; and the pale, little, resolute mother stood up with nothing but her strong mother heart to do battle with her.

"So Rupert can read," said Lady Fane, one day, in her soft invalid whisper. "Do you hear that, my darling?"

"I don't care," murmured a voice smothered in her dress; "but he has three whips, and they all crack."

"I dare say," answered his mother; "he learnt in his books how to crack them."

"Did he?" said the young dunce, emerging suddenly and eagerly. "Aunt May, teach me to read."

"No; come here, my dear Edward, your Aunt Marion is no governess. Come to my room, and I will give you a lesson."

Mrs. Trevor proffered in vain. The "little wretch," as she termed him, shrunk closer into his usual shelter.

Rupert was an object of great envy to Edward; he watched his manly attempts to ride with wonder, and heard him crack his whips (which his vigorous young arm did as loud as any man) with an intense longing to do the like.

Rupert, on his part, regarded his sickly and babyish cousin with a mingled mixture of astonishment and compassion. His long fair curls made him doubtful as to whether he was a boy at all, and his peevishness was so unfamiliar to Rupert's mind, that he watched him as the curious naturalist regards the ways and habits of an unknown animal.

Mrs. Trevor, finding soft words, hard words, cutting words of no avail, shortly left the room.

Then Marion felt a sharp plucking of her sleeve.

"Teach me to read," said the "little wretch," looking rather more amiable than usual.

The flush of pleasure that spread over Lady Fane's white face was enough for Marion.

She brought Rupert's book, and found with pleasure that Edward was further advanced in the amiable vernacular of a "Reading-made-Easy" than she could have hoped.

"My sister is so jealous of my poor little boy," murmured Lady Fane. "So she is of your children, Marion. You must guard against her influence with Godfrey. I know she designs to have his children brought up like her own poor little sad girls."

"No; Godfrey loves them too well," answered Marion, shuddering.

"True; but he is selfish, like us all. And when did anything selfish act rightly?"

Marion looked up, in surprise at a sentiment so unwonted proceeding from the lips of an Asheton.

As if exhausted by having said so much, Lady Fane lay back on the sofa, with closed eyes, and appeared to sleep.

In subdued voice, Marion instructed Edward, to whom there appeared no necessity to urge quiet. From this, Marion argued he was not wholly without affections. He loved his mother.

That evening Lady Fane appeared in evening dress in the

highest spirits. Mrs. Trevor was subdued into dull astonishment as she contradicted, argued, and refuted her opinions with a force and intelligence it had never been supposed she possessed.

"My dear Cecilia," said her father, as he was wheeled into the dining-room, after that repast was over, and made his appearance at the same time as the dessert and the children, "you have stolen a march upon me. Are you quite prudent in venturing so much?"

"Oh, yes, papa. I have not felt so well for months. Marion has given my boy such a delightful reading-lesson, and intends kindly to do so every day."

And she glanced at her sister in triumph.

Mrs. Trevor turned pale.

"What a charming creature Mrs. Clifton is! No wonder your children are so healthy; she must have been the perfection of a nurse. I only wish I had had her for Edward. We had such a nice meeting there this evening; Mrs. and Miss Priscilla Flower—a great tea—such kissing and fondling! How dearly your children are loved by everyone, Marion."

Lady Fane, in pleasing herself and plaguing her sister, scarce knew the precipice upon which she was dragging Marion.

"If I were you, Godfrey," said Mrs. Trevor, "I should take my children entirely away from home. The association of objectionable relations, joined to the familiarity and freedom that old servants take, would warrant any parent in removing his child from such intercourse."

"My dear Ellinor," said her father, "where did you pick up such doctrine?"

"It has been forced upon me, my dear father, as it will be forced upon Godfrey, when he sees the deplorable effects of such contamination."

"God forbid that my son should ever see that his father was in error, when he educated him as a thorough English gentleman, among his own people and neighbours."

"The world is very different now, my dear father, to what it was then," answered Godfrey. "I own that I shall not think I have done my duty by my children if I do not show them the difference between their own country and others, and let them choose the one most fitted for them."

"I do not understand you, my son."

"My dear father, pardon me, if I say aught that grieves you,

but for some time it has been my intention to take my children to Italy and educate them there."

"From what motive, sir?" asked his father, sadly, but firmly.

"No doubt England is a fine and noble country, such, my dear father, as will always make me proud to belong to her. But for the fine classic mind, the delicate perceptions, the refinements of life, how can one look for such in boisterous, healthy, rude England?"

"Nay," said his father, testily, "can you find such qualities in your fawning, cringing foreigner? Heaven and earth! Godfrey, overmuch study on education has turned your brain. Pray hurt your poor old father no more by such obliquity of judgment. Make your son a Christian and an English gentleman, and your daughters worthy daughters of England, and then thank God that they are such."

"I agree with my brother, my dear father," said Mrs. Trevor; "and in looking back upon all I have done for my girls, my only regret is that they have not been brought up on the classic ground of Italy. There, with nothing around them but what is beautiful and noble, with every art and accomplishment in the highest perfection, their senses would become so accustomed to the highest standard of beauty and excellence that they would at sight imbibe all that one would wish them to know. At present, as my brother says, in homely, unrefined England, how are they to escape being contaminated? How can we expect them to become 'Nature's finished work?'"

"My May," said Mr. Asheton, sorrowfully, "do you think thus?"

"No; I would wish my boy to be educated like his father, and my girls to be English girls, simple and good."

"I am aware of your taste, Marion," said her husband, "and——"

A scuffle among the children interrupted him. Absorbed by their conversation, no one heeded that Edward had emerged from his shelter, and had gone to forage among the dessert for something that he loved. Encountering his cousin Etta on a similar expedition, he could not resist so favourable an opportunity for perpetrating a piece of mischief on her. With one hand he tightly grasped her curls, while with the other he dexterously squirted some orange juice into her eyes. The little girl, inured to much suffering, resolutely tried not to cry, but in vain—the smart was too great; and just as young Rupert, who had, unknown to Edward, been a witness of his doings, came up

to the rescue, she began to shriek. Thus everybody turned round, as Rupert, planting his little sturdy frame against Edward's more fragile, but still twice as old, figure, gave him a well-directed, stout blow on the nose, that sent him reeling on the floor.

As Edward screamed lustily, so did Lady Fane shriek, flying on the instant to raise her injured boy.

"A specimen of an English gentleman," said Godfrey, bitterly. "Come here, sir; what do you mean by such outrageous behaviour?"

"Papa, he hurt cousin Etta, and—"

Lady Fane's shrieks failed suddenly. A dark stream was welling from her mouth. Her husband caught her as she wavered, fainting; and bearing her from the room, it took but a few minutes to place her on a bed, and send for doctors and restoratives.

But a conviction fell upon all simultaneously.

The angel of death was approaching the house.

It was indeed so.

Yet she revived after a while, and the family gathered round the dying bed at her request.

Whispering low, they could just catch her faint words.

"My boy, Marion," she said.

"I will take care of your boy," said Mrs. Trevor; "he shall be the same to me as my own child."

"No, no," she gasped. "Marion, promise; Godfrey, Marion, promise."

"What, dear Cecilia?" said Marion; "what can I do for you?"

"Take my boy—yours, he is yours—oh! promise."

Marion looked at her husband. She felt guilty and wicked in her heart thus to deny a dying bequest. Yet something within her seemed to say, "Grant it not."

Lady Fane rose with an effort, and taking Godfrey's hand, said distinctly—

"Promise that my boy may live with Marion."

"I promise," said Godfrey, "if his father does."

"Most thankfully do I accept such care for him," said Sir Robert.

"Nay, give not such a trust," said Marion, hurriedly; "the responsibility is too great, I cannot, may not, accept it."

"Godfrey has promised," said Lady Fane, with joyful, clear voice. "Take my boy; here he is yours." She tried to rush

the terror-stricken child from her side, but the effort was too great.

A deadly paleness came over her face ; she struggled vainly to speak. As if interpreting her agonised look of entreaty, Marion slowly, and half deprecatingly, drew the boy towards her, until she encircled him with her arms, while he clasped her close.

The look of suffering changed to one of delight. Lady Faue meekly crossed her white hands on her bosom, as if prepared to pray ; but as she did so, her spirit fled, leaving the smile impressed upon the marble features. And Marion, as she gazed upon the dead face wearing that look of peace and happiness, wondered if, after a life of vain nothingness, and a death without preparation, the strong mother's love within her had won for that weak, erring spirit the place in heaven such a smile betokened.



CHAPTER XXX.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE.

DARK falls the wings of Death when he alights suddenly, and, for the first time, on a prosperous household. A nameless terror seizes the young, a vague despondency the old. Heretofore, they had been sealed with the strong gifts of health and good fortune, which Time had, year by year, cemented to the impervious state of oblivion and indifference, so that Death walked on each side of them, and they feared not.

Their neighbours disappeared, their friends departed from among them, but their threshold was sacred. Death could not pass it. In this delusion they lived, neither wondering nor grateful that their hearth was not undiminished.

Upon such a household, the touch of death leaves an always-felt, but never-spoken, conviction of his return. They feel unsafe. The unrighteous jealousy of Mrs. Trevor slept for a time ; the irrational crotchets of Mr. Godfrey Asheton were forgotten. All mourned together, as if they felt that death had not left the house—he was yet waiting.

And he came. Mr. Asheton never recovered the shock of his

daughter's death. He lingered on, just kept alive by constant care, until his own state was a burden to him, and he longed to depart.

"I am not old, in the common acception of the word, May Flower, because several of my work-people are hale and hearty yet, though they number many more days than I do. But I am old in heart. Why is it, that we of the upper class, born to no toil, weakened by no burdens, taxed by no trouble, should sink into the grave worn out and old; while those who have borne the burden and heat of the day, toil on, until death, coming, touches them even at work? You do not answer, May? You cannot. Then I will tell you. We are aged through our own luxuries, daintinesses, and humours, until we become satiated and disgusted, and that which pleased us before is insufferable at last; and thus we go on, the healthy blood and good spirit given us by our gracious Lord, vitiated in one case, and contaminated in the other. Make my boy, Rupert, a good Christian. Tell him his grandfather's last wishes, that he is to work, work hard, for the benefit of all around him. He is not to think only of Rupert Asheton; God will remember him while he is mindful of others. Then, May Flower, your boy, you may hope, will not die of old age at sixty-nine, worn out with doing nothing. But I remembered my God in time, thanks be to His unspeakable mercy; and you will be blest, child, because you were the means thereof."

Much need had the little mother of this prophecy; but she was not all perfect, and her fears being keen and bitter, a mist hid these words from her memory.

Mr. Asheton survived his daughter three months, and then died calmly, his hand in his wife's clasp—a smile on his lips.

It is not to be supposed that the good father left his son in ignorance of his opinion and wishes regarding his grandchildren, or the deference that should be paid to the wishes of their mother.

On the contrary, without intending it, he had rather confirmed an idea lately implanted in Godfrey's mind, that Marion, in fear for the influence she was about to lose, had instigated this appeal in her favour. Thus it fell powerless.

Godfrey intended but to take six months to adjust all his affairs at home, to reconcile his mother to the change, to prepare Marion for a separation from one, if not two, of her children while that mother lived, and to go, fulfilling his intention of educating his son abroad.

But even though he unfolded his plans by degrees, the anger of his mother startled him.

"I do not go abroad with you, Godfrey; I die at home, and will be buried in the grave with my dear Mr. Asheton."

"Mother, I did not intend to take you from home. I would delay longer, but Rupert is now five years old. Nothing but my father's state has delayed me so long."

"And your wife?"

"As long as you wish it, Marion will remain with you."

"What! Separate the mother from her children, and hope for a blessing? Never! Oh, my dear Mr. Asheton, our mourning for you is to be felt of bitterness, not resignation."

"My dear mother," interrupted Mrs. Trevor, "I intend accompanying Godfrey. I will be everything that a mother can desire to her children, as Marion must know. Godfrey is in some measure necessitated to leave Marion behind, because she already possesses more influence over Rupert than is good for him; besides, she has Edward. I may fairly assume, she arranged with my poor sister, ere her lamented death, that she was to have the charge of him. To what otherwise can I attribute the extraordinary fact of the forgetfulness of myself, her own sister? Nothing but kindness to the dead has sealed my lips; but I can assure you, my heart has cried shame for a deed both uncalled for and discreditable."

But Mrs. Asheton was too indignant to be talked down.

"I desire that you leave me here alone with Edward. I will not consent that Marion should be parted from her husband and children. See, here is Marion. Tell me, May, will you give up your children? Will you suffer Godfrey to take them?"

"Godfrey is too just to do so, without my consent," she answered.

"That is true, Marion; but still I ask it of you."

"Ask me rather for my heart, torn, bleeding, and wounded, from my side," was her answer.

Mrs. Asheton kissed her fondly.

Mrs. Trevor was about to speak, but Godfrey, with a peremptory gesture," prevented her.

"I understand you," she said, bitterly and coldly, "and I do not ask again."

At first, both Mrs. Asheton and Marion felicitated themselves upon this easy adjustment of the mooted question. But not for long.

Day by day, hour by hour, this feeling dwindled away. It

was impossible for one apportioned by nature with a heart gentle as Marion's to live at war with any one, much less the husband of her love, the father of her children.

The cold formal manner that Godfrey now adopted towards her was more hard to bear than any other mode he could have adopted. Not all her winning ways, not all her loving devotion, her unerring judgment as regarded his other wishes (and rarely was she gifted with the sweet smiles of tenderness), elicited one spark of affection, or broke through that icy bearing.

Her eyes, usually so soft, became larger, distended by fear; her sweet face was pale and attenuated, its innocent, frank expression gone, and yet, much as she suffered, Godfrey endured more, and showed it.

He was indeed too just to follow out his wishes against her consent, but these wishes had become part of himself. Moping and melancholy, he wandered about his home, a more wretched and hopeless creature than when he was first introduced to the reader. And, as if to worry him still further, Mrs. Flower, taking advantage of their hour of affliction, had once more established herself in Asheton Court, as chief consolator and adviser in their grief.

Armed with sermons upon all subjects, she trotted up daily with undiminished zeal and good humour. And if at all conscious of any rebuff from the stately Godfrey, or intended rudeness from the less courteous Mrs. Trevor, she glossed it over at once, by saying—

“Ah! poor things, how they feel! It is easy to see what they must have suffered by their tempers; grief often turns that way. Constant must be mindful to give them all the consolations of the church.”

To Godfrey she became intolerable; she discussed all their affairs with the utmost frankness; she discoursed about the children until the whole world knew the secrets of the Asheton nurseries, and she held up Master Asheton as a model in all his sayings and doings to every little dirty beggar brat in the school.

“The example is so good, my dear Godfrey,” buzzed she. “I am delighted to have such an example to hold up to them; it benefits the boy a great deal more than all Constant's sermons.”

Godfrey may be pardoned for wishing the English Channel between himself and Asheton Court, or Mrs. Flower kindly taken by Providence to heaven.

This state of things became intolerable both to husband and wife, yet neither showed any disposition to give way.

One day, all unknown to each other, they both wandered out by separate paths, to pour forth in secret solitude the grief that was killing them. Suddenly they met, at the very point where Godfrey had told her, whether she accepted him or not, he would love no other woman.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN WHICH MRS. TREVOR HAS AN OPPORTUNITY OF AT LAST TELLING
MARION SHE IS NOBODY.

MARION started. Godfrey was unmoved.

"I—I thought Rupert was with you," she asked.

"I know nothing about him," he answered.

"Are they—are the children, then, not out?"

"I have not seen them to-day."

"Oh, Godfrey, do you remember this spot?" and she clasped his arm, with a gush of sudden tears.

"Yes, I do; but I have just been to visit another, where I heard words that I have treasured in my heart, only to find them worthless. Let me pass."

"Nay; tell me what they were, if you love me?"

"Love you! I think I have proved what I said here. Can you say as much, when you recal the words in which you taught Count Julian the meaning of real love, unselfish love?"

He left her, smitten with a sudden conviction.

"Yet he asks more of me than my life. More than in my wildest love I ever thought to give. But he ceases to care for his children! Not seen them to-day! His children, our little children, so beloved, so idolized. Nay, 'twere better—yes, it must be—it shall be. God will strengthen me. I will but make one last appeal."

Swiftly, as if to banish thought, Marion ran home. Without a pause, she went straight to Mrs. Trevor's room, and knocked for admission.

Giving her no time for surprise or remonstrance, Marion, with clasped hands and beseeching eyes, thus entreated her :

" Oh, Ellinor, use your influence with my husband, and beseech him to remember that God, in giving his children two parents, meant that each should take a share in the burden, the love, the care. I may be uneducated in your sense of the word, but can a mother teach that which is wrong to her child? Is it necessary for a loving heart to be learned or clever? Can I be wrong in wishing my children to be known and loved among their fellow-creatures? Is it right that they should be instructed? There is contamination among those with whom they are placed, their mother included. Oh, Ellinor, if they imbibe the creed—' Stand by, I am holier than thou,' what is to prevent God pronouncing on them that dread requital—' Take thou the lower place.' " Marion paused, overpowered.

" Oh, if you bring religion into the matter, I have nothing to say. Though, with a man so conscientious as my brother, so exact in all his religious duties, attending church so regularly, having family paayers, and many other things that few young men think of now-a-days, I should have considered such remarks quite unnecessary."

" It is true, he is conscientious in such things, yet it does not follow but that he may perform them in the spirit of the Pharisee, who gave his exact tythes and repeated his long prayers. I fear sometimes for him, for, as regards his children, he puts himself in the place of God. All is to be done for them by him; nothing is left for the Father of us all to perform, who can bless the smallest effort, and yet leave the over-anxious parent without a ray of his softening influence. I speak thus openly to you, Ellinor, because to you I owe it that I am in this misery."

" And I am proud to think that it is so; proud that, at least with the head of the family, I yet hold my proper place and influence. Rest contented with having usurped that place with others."

" I neither sought for such place, Ellinor, nor wished to supplant you. And in proof of the power you hold in your hands, I beseech you, by the love you bear your own children, let me not be separated from mine."

" Oh, you begin to consider you must give way. Quite time, I can assure you; no one but my brother would have borne with your obstinacy so long. As for influencing him as you wish, I shall do no such thing. I am even more alive than he is to the danger of their remaining under your influence, and

the society here, besides the example of so spoilt a boy as young Edward."

"The charge of that boy was forced upon me; my first duty is to my own children."

"Nevertheless, Marion, you have undertaken the charge; and as you appear very full of your religious quotations, let me beg you to study a few for his and your benefit."

"You will not help me then?"

"So far from it, knowing my brother as well as I do, I can but uphold him, pity him, mourn for him; of course he will soon lose all interest in those fine children, so clever, so like himself; and having no happiness at home, he will accompany me abroad. You can then educate your children, if you know how, after your own fashion. It is all very well wringing your hands and looking miserable, you are not so much to be pitied as my brother. He has ceased to care for his boy, he no longer delights to watch Isabel, and as for the little Mabel, whose love for her father is perfectly beautiful, and in whom he is so wrapt—"

"Cease, cease," murmured Marion; and covering her face with her hands, as if to hide the agony of her heart, she cried, "Oh! Godfrey, Godfrey, take my children, if it must be so; but you do it at the price of my affection."

Marion's hands were gently withdrawn from her face. "Wherefore so, Marion?" asked Godfrey, who stood before her.

"Because you will evermore seem cruel to me."

"And why? Am I more cruel to you than you to me? Am I so harsh a father that I am not to be trusted? Because I have set my heart upon a plan of education, am I therefore devoid of all love and affection?"

"You have but little for me."

"Do you seek to win more?"

"I have said, take my children, take all. I would rather lose them all than that they should cease to be objects of love to you."

"Marion, my Marion, is such your feeling? I thank you. I owe your reluctance to no mistrust. We have wronged her, Ellinor."

"How could any other motive be assigned to conduct so inconceivable?" murmured Mrs. Trevor, becoming pale in her turn.

"Marion," said her husband, unheeding Mrs. Trevor, "we

have been miserable, because we have not confided in each other; hear what I have to say, and by the full confession I make to you, promise that you unveil your heart to me. It is my desire, my wish (these two words but faintly express what I would have you conscious that I feel) to take all my children abroad with me. I have, as you know, never said as much before; yet am I sure that, in leaving one behind (one who makes me love her with a strange infatuation), I shall be so wearying for her presence, so wondering as to her growth and pretty ways, it may be that the pleasure I derive from the improvement of the other two will be marred. I am anxious, desirous, to have my children to myself, without their mother. It is not that I love their mother less than when I married her; but, I acknowledge, a different love has taken possession of me—it is that which I bear for the children she has given me. They must be mine entirely; if I own their love, their obedience, to any other influence than my own, I cease to care for it at all. When I can say to myself, they think, speak, feel, only as I wish, moved solely by love and deference to me, I will restore them to their mother. My heart is bared before you.”

“If my children are to lose their father’s love and interest, through a mistaken (ah, how mistaken!) fear of their mother’s influence, take them, take them all. I can bear their absence better than his estrangement from them.”

Godfrey drew her towards him, and clasping her close, said, as he gathered back the curls from her face, that he might the better see it:—

“Yet, Marion, I love you thus much, I cannot take them at the price of your affection.” For a moment, Marion forgot her children in the great joy that she was indeed so dear to him.

Vivid blushes succeeded each other quickly, and the large tears of irrepressible emotion rose to her eyes. But even with them came the eager wish, the strong desire, to show how she valued his love.

“Take them, Godfrey; have I proved that I know what real love is? Take them, and be still as dear to my heart as before.”

And it is ever so. The more fine the tissues of the heart, the more noble are its deeds. The wealth of love, endurance, and self-abnegation, that pours itself forth without sound, without voice, unwhispered, from a gracious spirit, is scarcely known, is not felt, by the murmuring, querulous performers of their duty, and nothing more. The pure and tempered steel bends even to a circle, yet returns uninjured and unsullied to its original form,

as if no hand had touched it, no force had struggled with it. Even so with the noble heart. What it gives is given with that greatness that leaves no trace of obligation; what is granted bears about the gift no mark of favour. Magnanimous in its decision, noble in its accomplishment, sublime in the faith and trust it exhibits, who can wonder that the trivial, selfish, give-and-take earthling cannot comprehend, much less value, a noble heart.

Godfrey kissed her weeping eyes.

"You have redeemed the words you uttered at the meeting of the pathways, and which, spoken to another, I had neither right to hear nor claim to mention. But they staid by me somehow, Marion; and I fretted as much at the weakness of your professions, when they were called upon to prove themselves in deeds, as at the difficulty I encountered in the furtherance of my wishes."

"It is done. If we have acted wrongly by our children, may God forgive us both."

"Amen," answered her husband.

And now Mrs. Trevor (an earthling) began to discover that foolish, weak, ignorant, as she had considered her sister-in-law, all these sins were nothing in comparison to the whimsical inconsistencies of her character.

After fretting herself and her husband into an almost state of derangement, through an obstinate determination to have her own way, she no sooner is persuaded to turn, than she does so with more rapidity than a weather-cock driven round by a tempest wind. Not another word of upbraiding, not a tear, not a sigh; arranging with heartless care and unnecessary pains all the preliminaries for her children's absence for an indefinite period. Cheerful, active, satisfied, and, above everything in the world, never neglecting for one single moment the exacting, troublesome amount of duty imposed upon her by the care and education of that dreadful boy, Edward Fane! Mrs. Trevor gave her up. For once, she had met with a character wholly inexplicable.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN WHICH GRISELDA-LIKE MARION MAKES HER FIRST SACRIFICE.

"AND pray when do these people leave us?" asked Mrs. Asheton of Marion.

In addition to whatever of heartburning Marion might be concealing so effectually in the depths of her self-abnegation, she was the recipient of all Mrs. Asheton's indignant remarks against her own children—the silent hearer of all her strong upbraidings against herself.

After having given her opinions to both Godfrey and Ellinor, without producing any effect, Mrs. Asheton, keenly mortified at their want of consideration for herself—sensitively alive yet to the loss of her dear Mr. Asheton, which loss had so changed her position in the family—doting on her grandchildren, and regarding Marion's chief merits (as they all appeared to do) to be that she was the mother of them—shut herself up in a dignified sullenness. They pursued their way without informing her; so should she go on in her daily routine of life, allowing none of their preparations to interfere with her rules.

She was as angry with Marion as she was with her son and daughter; and felt she had more reason to be so, because she was considered as quite a sufficient companion for her, though unsuitable to them. An insult! in every way an insult.

"I fear it will be soon," sighed Marion, in answer to her question. "The travelling-carriage and the *fourgon* have arrived."

"Preposterous! I thought railways were all over the kingdom now."

"The railways are to take these carriages. Godfrey does not wish the children to go in those furnished for the public."

"And pray, may I ask who is that detestable looking creature, with as much hair on his face as if he was condemned to wear the tail of one of the coach-horses?"

"He is the courier."

"I am glad, at least, that they are to have one with them who can speak some language besides English. My daughter Ellinor is not so great a linguist as she imagines."

"This man speaks five languages perfectly."

"One would be too many for me, if I had to listen to it out of a cavity of hair. Disgusting! And pray, have you again given way? Are the children's English nurses to come home, after they are provided with foreign ones?"

"Yes, mother."

"God forgive you, my dear,—I cannot. Oh, my poor, dear, lamented Mr. Asheton, how has all your kindness been wasted! The children you doted on are sacrificed by both father and mother."

Marion never lay down at night on the bed, in which her beating heart would not permit her to rest, without at least thanking God the day for separation was not fixed; she never rose in the morning without the choking feeling in the throat, produced by the fear that it would be settled ere night.

And yet must it be soon; every preparation was complete, nothing more remained to be done. Her mother's heart could suggest no further need for the pleasure or benefit of her idolized children.

She hoped, she was convinced, Godfrey felt too much himself to fix the woful hour.

But selfish love is very calculating.

"Marion, will you walk with me to the sea-shore this morning?" asked Godfrey.

She assented, but with a strange fear.

Never had Godfrey been so amiable, so cheerful, so prone to little kindnesses, quite foreign to his unbending nature.

"Ah," thought the little sensitive mother, "he is going to tell me the day—the hour."

They reached the point where he had spoken to her, told her of his love—his wishes.

"When I am gone, May, come often to this spot, and think kindly of me," he said, pausing, and throwing one arm about her.

"And you go, when, Godfrey?"

"Soon, dearest; nay, very, very soon. May, it is here that I mean to bid you farewell."

"It is no need to be here; I shall feel it as deeply anywhere."

"My Marion, dear, gentle wife, if I am to effect the purpose for which I take my children abroad, it will be difficult to do so with any remembrance, any painful recollection of a parting from their English home, from, in fact, their mother."

"I will command myself; I have been very good, Godfrey."

"A thousand times better than I could have hoped; but at the last, Marion, I fear you will give way."

"I think not—I hope not."

"To spare both you and them, I have arranged——"

"Godfrey, hush, say no more. I must see the last of my children; I must kiss and bless them—I must whisper to my boy, my Rupert, how his mother loves, dotes on him; he must not not forget her—oh! he must not—I must see my children to the last moment, Godfrey; they are to bid farewell to their mother."

"Marion, be calm; hush, love. How you sob! Oh! May, forgive me; I fear I have done wrong—they are gone."

"Gone!—where?"

"They were to leave while we were absent."

She had the quickest perception, that little tender heart; he had no time to say more.

With a wild cry, with a sudden strength, she bounded from him, and he saw her light form glancing through the trees like some flitting spirit. He followed her with a speed of which he did not think himself capable, but he only caught glimpses of her hurrying on.

Poor Marion! she reached the hall-door in time to see the weeping grandmother borne away in tears, the marks of heavy wheels deep in the gravel. She staggered, breathless and stricken.

"Madam, pray come this way—come to this upper room. You can see the carriages for more than a mile; and Master Asheton was looking out of the window, calling you."

And Stephenson, Mrs. Asheton's own maid, in pity for the poor, little, bereaved mother, left her mistress to the care of the housekeeper, while she almost carried Marion up the stairs.

It was a long, low room, at the top of the house, used by Stephenson herself, and from the windows could be traced for some distance the carriage road. Marion clutched the iron bar, to steady herself. Yes, there was her boy, leaning far out of the window, looking back. Stephenson waved the handkerchief—the mother had not strength to do it. It was seen and answered.

"He sees you, madam; he sees you, the darling, noble boy. I knew—for all they told him such fine stories of what he was going to see—he cared for nothing but his dear mamma."

"Aunt May, Aunt May," said a peevish voice, pulling at her gown.

"What is it, Edward," answered Marion, as she always did the motherless boy, in her gentlest voice.

"Look at me, Aunt May. Why do you gaze out of the window? I want to speak to you."

She placed one trembling hand on his head, answering—

"Soon, Edward, soon, I will speak to you."

But she never turned her eyes from the one spot.

"Will you go away, sir?" said Stephenson, in an angry whisper.

"No, I won't. Aunt May, Rupert is gone, and only think, he has taken his best whip with him, and he cracked it as they drove from the door, as if he was glad to go. Isn't it a shame?"

Stephenson, seeing the spasm of agony that began to throb in Marion's throat, snatched the boy to remove him, but he screamed, and resisted. Even in that moment, her heart almost stopping, for the next turn would hide her darlings from her sight, she just sobbed—

"Wait, let him wait!"

But it was too much. The good Stephenson knew the carriage must have passed out of sight, for the quivering eyelids closed, the clasping hands gave way, and she would have fallen but for the timely entrance of Godfrey, who caught her as she wavered.

Utterly insensible, he bore her to her room.

"Fane," he said, "I must leave her now, in this state, otherwise I know that I could not part from her. Will you comfort her? Will you tell her all I would say? Oh! Marion, I cannot, no, I will not leave you thus."

"Pray, be advised by me, and go at once. You can do her no good. Write to her the first opportunity. Rely upon my best brotherly attentions; but if you wish to be consistent, go at once."

When Marion awoke from her insensibility, her mother and Sir Robert were watching by her couch. She looked eagerly round in a moment.

"Godfrey is gone. He thought it better, for both your sakes, that you should be spared a parting."

If Marion felt any emotion, she was skilful in hiding it, even from the self-interested eyes of Sir Robert Fane.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PRISSY AND SIR ROBERT FANE EXCHANGE CONFIDENCES.

"STEPHENSON," said Mrs. Asheton, as she was being wheeled about in her garden-chair, by that faithful handmaiden, "I think my poor dear is better, she has more colour in her cheeks to-day."

"The young madam is so gentle, madam; she never complains. But the first thing in the morning, and the last thing ere it is dusk, she taps at my door, and asks leave to look out of my window. Then, madam, I see how she suffers."

"Poor darling; but it is all her own fault, she should have remained firm."

"Well, madam, we in 'The Room' say, never anyone before dare thwart Mr. Asheton as she has done; and she only gave way, madam, for fear he should cease to love the children. I was thinking, madam, if it was not a liberty to propose it, and as we are not likely to see company for some time, the young madam would take it very kind if that upper room was left wholly for her use, to go in and out when she pleased."

"What sort of room is it, Stephenson?"

"It is a fine, large room, madam, only low, with the pretty casemented window in the archway of the roof. Newly papered and painted, it would be not unfit for the young madam. Then she could go pray for her children whenever it pleased her."

"Pray?"

"Yes, madam, I know she does; for though I always leave the room, I have met her coming from there, and I knew from her face she had been praying."

"I think my dear Mr. Asheton was right, Stephenson, when he said, we were like the family of Tobit—an angel had entered our house unawares, and we none of us knew it. I will have your room newly done up, and presented to my daughter. And you shall go to—or, stay, I will write to our London upholsterer, who shall send down a pretty carpet, and nice furniture and paper."

"And I will put in the children's pictures, madam, and all the little things they mostly loved, which she has collected in

her present room. It is so large a room, madam, it has three other windows besides the double one, and part can be portioned off for a sleeping-room, and part for a sitting-room."

"And you must also be particular, Stephenson, in ornamenting it with pretty china. Select some of the prettiest and nicest. Don't refrain because it is rare; let my daughter have all the best things in the house put into her room, that she may have pretty objects to amuse her."

"She is much better since she received Mr. Asheton's letter. And if Master Fane was not so troublesome—"

"Indeed he is, Stephenson; when I contrast him with our darlings, it is too much for me. I have remonstrated with her spending so much time on him, when he is so obstinate and perverse, and she answered me, 'Mother, if I do my duty by this boy, God will make strangers do theirs by my children, perhaps.' It was pretty of her, Stephenson, very, very pretty, such a thought."

And the whilom haughty eyes of the once imperious Madam Asheton overflowed with tears.

"It would do both you and the young madam good, madam, to have a little company. When Sir Robert goes, you will be a sad pair to comfort each other, madam. That is a nice cheerful young lady, the younger Miss Flower."

"A very good thought. I will write and invite her this day."

Prissy obeyed the summons with high delight. Not that she evinced any pleasure in visiting Mrs. Asheton. On the contrary, Prissy considered it only due to herself to "ride the high horse" with Mrs. Asheton, and make it distinctly understood to her, she would accept no invitation to Asheton Court but to please **May**, which, as Mrs. Asheton clearly did not expect her to come for anything else, was amiably settled between them, and without reference to the fact that Prissy's dignified stateliness was utterly lost upon Mrs. Asheton as a mark of her displeasure. Had she thought about it at all, probably she would have praised such evident efforts to ape the Ashetons.

May's "Thank you, mother," when she heard of the room about to be prepared for her sole use, was low, but sufficiently emphatic to speed Mrs. Asheton on with redoubled vigour to get it ready. And a partition having been broken into that opened into a smaller room, this served as bath and wardrobe room.

No queen could have desired a prettier apartment, with its quaint corners, its gabled roof, its beautiful and singular furni-

ture, all illumined and shadowed in various picturesque lights, caused by so many windows. And when invested with an attraction so sacred in its nature, as being the spot from whence she had last seen her children, no wonder that Marion hallowed and loved it with equal intensity.

"I think," remarked Sir Robert to Prissy, "you all appear so much more cheerful and comfortable, that you hardly require my presence any longer."

"No, that we don't," answered the simple-hearted Prissy; "gentlemen are so much in the way when there is only one, unless, indeed, like papa, he is always writing sermons."

"Which I need not assure you is not my vocation," said Sir Robert. "Your sister appears very ill."

"Yes; mamma and I cannot think what is the matter with her, though we have guessed and guessed, and recommended her quantities of remedies."

"I shall walk over to the Wood-head this evening, and give her my advice," said Sir Robert; "and you won't forget, Priscilla, that if ever you or Marion require help, call upon me."

"Oh, but I don't think we shall now, thank you. Those tiresome people are all gone, you know, and we intend leading very quiet lives; and May designs to teach herself and me all manner of things, and then there is Edward—what a naughty boy he is, Sir Robert."

"I am afraid he is."

"My goodness, I forgot he was your son—isn't he your son? You always call him Sir, and he always calls you Sir, so that really I quite forgot."

"Don't apologise. I wish to ask you one question. Whose was that letter, the one which gave Marion such pleasure this morning?"

"It was from her sister, Lady Gordon; and it praised her very much for all she had done; and said she had decided very well, and that God would reward her. And I know how, Sir Robert. Mr. Asheton will bring his children home quite ruined with foreign ways, and then May will set them all right, and then he will love her more than ever, and they will never quarrel about the children again, but live happy, and have a great many more."

"I think three children quite enough in a family, Priscilla. I should never desire more."

"Well, but what business is it of yours if other people

like to have ten? I always think it such a good thing that nobody thinks alike; not but that Mr. Asheton is very stupid that he does not think like May, because she is always right."

"*Ergo*, he is always wrong."

"I know nothing about *Ergo*. *Ergo* may just think as he chooses, and he is sure to be wrong if he thinks like Mr. Asheton."

"You don't like him?"

"No, that I don't."

"He used to tell me he liked you."

"And so he ought. I am not like him."

Sir Robert could not but laugh.

"I will tell you what I will do, if you desire it. I'll go and shoot Asheton, and get Marion a better husband."

"You may be as wicked as you please, but May will never marry anybody else."

"Why not?"

"Because she won't."

"Have you no better reason?"

"What is better than that she won't?"

"Your arguments are unanswerable, so good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye. But I wouldn't think of shooting Mr. Asheton if I was you, because you will be hanged and he will be pitied, and he does not deserve to be that, any more than you to be hanged."

"Is that girl a fool or not, I wonder?" thought Sir Robert; and he never settled the question rightly all the way to the Wood-head.

"Mrs. Flower, you must send back your daughter to her native Italy. And I can tell you, Miss Flower, that it will not be long before you have a summons there. How those unlucky people, full up to their eyes of English whims and prejudices, will get on without some kind friend to help them, I know not. You will be everything to them; so I trust, if Mrs. Trevor writes, you will not fail to go."

"There," Sir Robert thinking again. "Now I shall be off to enjoy myself. I have managed matters pretty well for a year or so, I fancy, without compromising my self-esteem, ycleped honour. I certainly suggested to Mrs. Trevor to have Miss Flower over, but it is not my fault if Miss Flower puts spokes into the wheels of Mr. Asheton's returning sense of domestic

ties; for I suppose he will be having fits of that sort. At all events, I shall think very ill of her talents as a disappointed woman if she does not take so fine an opportunity to have her revenge upon her usurping cousin."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HOW MUCH THE LITTLE ASHETONS GAINED AFTER SIX MONTHS' EDUCATION IN THE CLASSIC LAND OF ITALY.

As far as Mr. Asheton and Mrs. Trevor were concerned, it is needless to say that their first essay of foreign habits and manners made them truly miserable.

Mr. and the Miss Trevors, not being allowed to feel anything without the leave of Mrs. Trevor, kept a discreet silence upon every subject; while the little small Ashetons, amused with the novelty of travelling, retained their good humour and spirits in a surprising manner—that is, surprising to their father and aunt.

Carrying about with them the laws and maxims of Asheton Court, they had of course to pay exorbitantly for the performance of them, while that performance was so imperfect, as to be worse to bear than to go without.

Foreigners are not disposed to let "my lor Anglais" lord it, without good fees for such a luxury; and the more they "lord it," of course the greater the toll.

The consciousness of being imposed upon, without the power of discovering the imposition, is peculiarly galling to an upright mind; and Mr. Asheton entered Rome with a strong feeling of disgust for everything and everybody as his prevailing sentiment for foreign ways and foreign people.

A beautiful and spacious Palazzo, the freedom from incessant worries caused by the journey, the exquisite air, the beautiful sky, and, above all, Mrs. Trevor's restoration to her usual spirits, which had been rather shattered by the many unexpected nuisances encountered in her El Dorado, soon restored him; and he commenced vigorously the education of his children.

One drop of comfort had soothed him through all—they were now his own. None other had the right to say, “Do this,” “Do that.” For though it was highly necessary for his own delectation that Mrs. Trevor should always be ready to offer her advice, and to exhilarate him with her energy, she was by no means to interfere with his children. They were in a separate part of the house. He was father, mother, and would have been nurse to them, only he did not know how to perform the necessary duties of that functionary.

He was fortunate in tutors and nurses, as most people are who pay what they are asked and make no demand.

Many excellent and very superior people called upon them, and proffered pyramids of advice, founded upon vast stones of experience.

As both Mr. Asheton and his sister felt rather like the Babes in the Wood, lost in a forest of unknown habits and languages, they were disposed to think very kindly of all the Robins that brought them olive branches. Which said Robins would have been browbeaten in England, had they presumed upon “friendly relations,” without fitting introductions and lengthened trial; not that this intercourse was wise, or beneficial to themselves.

A great fluency in foreign speech was an unfailing recommendation to Mrs. Trevor, and an extreme interest in the welfare and education of the young Ashetons a proportionate claim upon their father’s good opinion.

And when things come to the worst, they must mend. The vexations of their journey brought into happy contrast their present freedom from such annoyances.

Had they been suddenly placed down in Rome from Asheton Court, they would, in all probability, have never settled comfortably. But after five or six weeks of utter misery, travelling, life in Rome appeared invested with charms no other life ever possessed.

In addition to this, Godfrey Asheton having led but a dull and monotonous life—rather like the fungus that rises and lives within the cavity of some splendid old beech tree, which looks down in disdain upon the little leaves that go hustling and bustling about in the world, preferred his grand hole and stolid position to their free measure of earth—Godfrey Asheton could not but be animated and enlivened by the new and wonderful sights that now surrounded him.

With a fine taste, a correct judgment, and a thorough appreciation of the beautiful, he entered with great spirit and interest

into all the different classes of people and things that the pursuit of such studies rendered imperative. He was not at Asheton Court—he was but one of many odds and ends from England. He began to find it was pleasant to unbend. It was a great relief to get down from his stilts and to discover that it mattered to no one whether he was on them or not. They did not appear to comprehend that Mr. Asheton, of Asheton Court, owed it to society and the world in general to sit up in high state, a model for mankind. They were perfectly content and satisfied that he should speak, think, and act exactly like themselves. At Asheton Court, there was a great sameness, and a dispassionate existence, that had no other excitement than a casual infringement of rules, which was not an agreeable mode of experiencing variety. Thus what appeared dulness to votaries of the world was full of enjoyment for Mr. Asheton. He attended the different studios. He had tutors for himself, and he encouraged the visits of everyone of whom he was told were remarkable for something. These employments made his life full of business; and the busy are generally happy.

Mrs. Trevor's good spirits lasted but a short time. She might have been Solomon in petticoats, but she was incapable of imparting her wisdom. She had intended to be a sort of reigning queen in literature and the arts; yet she more than suspected she was only considered her brother's housekeeper. She had been necessitated to demand Mr. Trevor's help in managing that house, and had had the mortification to discover that he knew Italian better than she did herself. Having informed her brother he need trouble himself in no manner of way concerning the internal arrangement of their joint establishment, she was in danger of having to implore his interference ere a week was over.

Nothing went right; and after having expended the money intended for three months in one, she was obliged to confess that foreign servants and foreign charges were utterly incomprehensible to her, entirely despicable, yet contumelious and irritating.

Mr. Asheton and Mr. Trevor were not more successful; and their domestic troubles kept steadily increasing, notwithstanding all the advice and help they received.

When people are worth robbing, and innocently unconscious of the manner in which they are robbed, their servants put a limit to their consciences of a relative measure, much after the fashion of Lord Clive's vindication of himself regarding Indian

bribes :—"My lord, when I consider what I might have taken, and what I did take, I am surprised at my own moderation."

But when they are suspected—when they are taxed with it, when they are found out—then bid adieu to anything like a limit for the future. If you forgive them, they laugh at you in secret, and steal double. If you dismiss them, they become your enemies, and lie with such effrontery that you begin to doubt the evidence of your own ears.

The above remarks will be found, word for word, in Mrs. Trevor's private journal, headed, "An Article on Foreign Servants."

They were all greatly relieved when Miss Flower came to their assistance, and, during the absence of her own family at Sorrento, took up her residence under the chaperonship of Mrs. Trevor until their return.

That Godfrey felt a twinge when he saw Beatrice is undoubted, and it was with a tremor in his voice that he asked, "How Marion looked?"

"Perfectly well," was the reply of Miss Beatrice. "I never saw her appear better or more happy; she has a gallop every day on the sands with her nephew, and we can hear their laughter up at the Woodhead, as they race against each other."

"What, can that sickly little fellow ride?" asked Mrs. Trevor; "I thought he was too great a coward to mount a donkey."

"Marion has taken great pains with him, and has made him fond of it."

"Marion had much better teach him to be a gentleman. Of what earthly use is it whether he can ride or not. So like one of her whims."

"And my mother?" asked Mr. Asheton, a disappointment oppressing him, spite of all he could do."

"She appears perfectly happy and well. They go on in clock-work fashion, never deviating from it in the smallest respect. Priscilla is almost always there—"

"Ah, very fit companions for each other. You may be sure, my dear Godfrey, that they suit each other admirably, and are entirely happy."

"Mrs. Trevor had seen the little twinge of conscience, the slight touch of disappointment. If the twinge was to become a pang, and the touch increase to a general over-allishness, what a blow to Mrs. Trevor. Mr. Sark's seam in the mine might as well have been the seam in a shirt, for aught good it was doing

in the way of money-getting, which was sad for the Trevors, as they had already spent a great deal of it in anticipation.

It was more than ever a matter of necessity, their remaining, not only abroad, but tacked to an establishment that paid the lion's share.

If Miss Beatrice Flower permitted herself to be surprised that Mr. Godfrey Asheton, after leaving his wife, should inquire about her health at all, or, turning the other way, should be disgusted (as most kind-hearted goody sorts of people would have been) that he asked so little, she had no cause to think the latter of her children.

As they sat talking, Rupert and Issa were ushered into the room by one of their tutors, in order to show their father what progress they were making.

Down went books and slates, they rushed up to Miss Flower—"Mamma, mamma, where is mamma?"

Rupert threw himself into an agony of grief on the floor at the answer, while the Demoiselle Issa had to be carried off sobbing like baby Mabel, instead of comporting herself, as a little lady of five years should do.

If the father, with his iron will, was bent upon lessening the influence of the mother upon the children, no less strong was the tenacity with which they clung to every remembrance of her. He was too just to forbid any mention of her, trusting that when their English nurses left, and the foreign ones took their places, an inevitable result would follow, consequent upon their means of communicating being so circumscribed. But they were children of free, frank natures. If they could not speak of the dear, darling mamma to their governess and nurses, papa must hear all they had to say. And had he not been steeped in the waters of pride, and made as invulnerable to common sense and good feeling as Achilles was by the waters of Styx to swords and lances, he must have been touched by their artless love, still more by the many proofs they gave of her influence, tending solely to making him the most loved and honoured of human beings. He had experienced some little trouble in managing them, and on more than one occasion Rupert had said, "I will try, papa, to do as you wish, for mamma will be unhappy if she hears that I have displeased you."

While Issa was even more decided, quoting her mother's words, and imitating all her ways, as much as her baby mind could remember. She, a determined little Asheton, showed the

exclusive nature she inherited from her father, by disdaining to love or care for any being but her mother. What she were, how she looked, and the words she used, were all treasured in her little heart with a wonderful tenacity, and quoted with a passion and pride that the foreign nurses dared not contradict.

Godfrey lost sight of the great advantage Miss Flower would prove to them, in the mortification he experienced on discovering that the mere sight of her awoke in the children's hearts their adoration of their mother; besides reviving all the little traits of her love and influence, which he had hoped the separation of six months would have obliterated.

Great was his chagrin that it took many days of incessant watching and forbearance, on his part, to soften down their irritation and disappointment; and even that was not so difficult to endure as their never-ending questions as to why she did not come to them, and when she would come. To use subterfuge with any one was utterly incongruous to Mr. Asheton's character, but to do so with his children was a direct violation of it. He was, therefore, often in such a state of perplexity and disturbance from those strangely shrewd questions that children are so apt to put, and as apt to insist upon being literally answered, and he even solicited Miss Flower's advice to free himself from it. Not being so scrupulous as himself, she used her own measures, and by degrees the children became once more happy and contented.

What they had gained at present by this sojourn in the classic land of all the fine arts may be summed up in a few words.

Rupert especially admired all equestrian statues, and would wish that their stony riders might dismount. Then would he take their place, and with a magic sign transform his steed of marble to one of flesh and blood, on whose back he could swiftly gallop to see his dear mamma.

Issa made adoration to the effigies of saints and virgins, in part love of spangled garments, and part for some fancied resemblance in their fair waxen faces to her mother.

Baby Mabel openly saluted every picture of angels and beauties as "Mamma, mamma, pretty mamma; me must kiss her." But they all three spoke Italian quite wonderfully.

CHAPTER XXXV

HOW THEY EMPLOYED THEMSELVES AT ASHETON COURT.

AND the young mother patiently abided at home, unconscious of the mourning of her little ones, and the unavailing cries with which they besought her presence. And yet, who dared to say she was unconscious? Why the quick tear, brushed away ere it could fall? Why the sudden flush, as if some inward thought had moved her spirit with a pang of anguish? Why those looks of pitiful yearning when she saw the cottage mothers playing with their children in the summer gloaming? More happy was their lot than hers, though they toiled hard, had but scant fare, and a lack of worldly pelf, that brought with each day its dole of anxiety for the providing of the morrow. Yet were they happy; all they loved was within touch of their hand. And yet still happier thy could toil and work for them, taking as best wages their soft kisses—as full payment their growth and healthy habits.

But this period was not without its advantages to the character of Marion.

The simple trust, the strong faith, that had invested her with an idiosyncrasy of disposition unusual in one so young, was somewhat effaced in her intercourse with the Ashetons. The more especially as, acting according to the impulse of that nature, she had confidingly thrown every thought and feeling into the power of their will. Thus, wholly unknown to herself, she was fast becoming one of themselves in all her deeds, if not so in her thoughts.

The last sacrifice having been completed, and her children removed from her care, it appeared as if, the pressure being withdrawn, her natural force of character recovered its tone; and once more having no other hope, she went to the fountain of all hope and love with the simplicity and trust of her earliest years.

No overpowering fiat, no law of Medes and Persians, interfered to check the original bias of her heart. On the contrary, she now ruled absolute and alone. Mrs. Asheton found an indescribable comfort and peace in the freedom from certain rules and ceremonies that, enforced, so mar the common pleasure of

everyday life. She began to discover that religion did not consist only in deeds, but was a portion of the heart, once penetrated, that opened out a spring of thoughts and feelings that not only mixed itself with every other act of life, but could never again be closed.

In the old, this new-born feeling is accompanied by much humility and fear. In the young, we often see it offensive and blemished by the over-zeal that borders upon presumption. Mrs. Asheton, by degrees, gave herself up to this new delight, associating all the last words of her dear Mr. Asheton with those she now felt, and discovering daily new reasons for thinking as he had done. It was, therefore, natural that all other affairs should be left wholly in the hands of Marion, and that the young madam (as she was apt to be called, in contradistinction to Madam Asheton) should now rule the kingdom deserted and despised by its legitimate sovereigns.

The care of Edward was an anxious one. The restoration to the simple habits and health of childhood appeared to Marion of more consequence than his education. But it required months of never-ceasing vigilance to counteract the evils fostered in his early years.

He had one redeeming point, of which Marion never failed to take advantage, namely, the remembrance of his mother. The hope of seeing her again would influence him in his most wretched moods, though he could not be made to understand the meaning of Death.

At present, eighteen months having passed since her death, his general health was greatly improved. He was rosy and fat, enjoyed the simplest food, was very different in temper, and no longer fretful and wayward.

Undoubtedly, he loved his Aunt Marion, but the love was of a very exacting nature, taking her care as his right, her interest and attention as his own, with no other that had the privilege to share it.

Allowing for a certain period to elapse, during which the Ashetons might mourn as deeply as they wished for the deaths that had occurred in the family, it began to be a matter of surprise to the surrounding neighbourhood, the length of time they employed in so doing.

The country being (as it often is) in that state of stagnation that any news is welcome, whether it hurts privately or shocks publicly, it began to be whispered about that strange things were going on at Asheton Court.

Mr. Asheton had not attended for a long time to his magisterial duties. Where was he? Gone away. But whither was he gone?—why was he gone?—who was gone with him? Rumour contradicted herself so flagrantly, that *No. 1* and *No. 2* young ladies, now transformed into amiable matrons, one as female assistant curate to a zealous rector, the other as wife of the banker at N—, fired with a noble energy to investigate the matter, again started on an errand of public inquiry. Not, however, for a gallop on the sands. Riches gave a carriage to the one, and a desire always to be accompanied by a grave young curate in embryo, about four years old, the other, instigated them to use another mode of visiting this time. The banker's wife kept her carriage, the rector's wife did not. So *No. 1* leant back in her own carriage, and patronised *No. 2*, to whom she had obligingly offered a seat, and they set off to the Wood-head. Mrs. Flower was now and then smitten with a love of gardening. When she gardened, it was no mere lady-like amusement. She dug, delved, planted, weeded, and watered, with as much zeal as if she was a day labourer working by the piece. Also she had a gardening dress. Even Prissy was disposed to be unkind in her remarks upon that dress, the principal feature of which was the bonnet. Intending to act as an effective screen against the sun's rude touch, it was tunnel-like in shape; at the end of it might be seen, with the naked eye, a round, red humid face, all smiles and heat. It might shelter from the sun, but it had its inconveniences—the wearer was deaf from the time of putting it on, and painfully circumscribed as to vision. Thus, when Mrs. Flower became aware she was being touched to attract her attention (she was weeding the young carrots), she hastily brought to bear the focus of her bonnet upon the toucher, and was highly delighted to greet and welcome *No. 1*. Her voice came hollow and strange out of the tunnel, sounding the reverse of joyous; and a little shriek of surprise at discovering, with some trouble, another figure touching the horizon of her view, appeared to *No. 2* to resemble a weak groan. However, there was no mistaking her pleasure.

She accompanied them into the house, divested herself of her bonnet, disclosing a knot of hair behind of two distinct colours, black and white, knotted up, for convenience' sake, into a thing of shreds and ends; and having placed some musty biscuits and an old orange in front of the young embryo curate, for his private enjoyment, proceeded to unburden her mind of every idea there might be in it.

Yet No. 1 and No. 2 did not gain much information, beyond that Mr. Asheton and the children were gone, and the two Mrs. Ashetons left behind. The fact was, Mrs. Flower appeared to think it such a perfectly natural arrangement, and enlarged so much on the dear darling children absolutely being able to speak Italian as fluently as they did English, and gave such a delightful description of their dear mamma's delight in hearing such news of them, was altogether so happy, complacent, and voluble about the whole matter, they were reluctantly obliged to own to each other, when they got into their carriage, that they could make nothing of her.

No. 1. "But they have been gone a year—what an odd couple!"

No. 2. "Ridiculously odd. Fancy George leaving me for a year! I would soon know the reason why."

No. 1. "Frederick would not leave me for a week, I am certain. I have often urged him, and he has gone, intending to stay the week, but returned in two days—dear fellow."

No. 2. "You may be sure there is some other reason than educating the children. Now, if Priscilla had been there, instead of that ridiculous old woman—did you see her boots, they must have been her husband's (so they were, old Wellingtons)—we might have heard some good and sensible reason."

No. 1. "Suppose we go to Asheton Court, and see for ourselves."

No. 2. "Law! my dear, would you dare?"

No. 1. "Dare! Of course I dare. Why, are they better than me, I should like to know?"

No. 2. "Oh, of course not, my dear Julia; only had I known you were going there, I would have put on my best bonnet."

No. 1. "They will guess, perhaps, that I picked you up walking, as they know you keep no carriage. Joseph, drive to Asheton Court."

No. 2. "Billy, you dirty boy, how dare you make such a mess of yourself with that orange?"

No. 1. "Oh, never mind that. He had better remain in the carriage, I think, if we are admitted."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN WHICH RUMOUR ONCE MORE BUSIES HERSELF ABOUT MARION, AND HAVING HAD TO ACKNOWLEDGE SHE IS NOT BLACK OUTWARDLY, THINKS IT NO HARM TO HINT SHE IS "DARK" WITHIN.

THEY were admitted, to the secret perturbation of both the ladies. She who came in her own carriage having, at the last moment, less assurance than she who was to be supposed to have been picked up.

Fortunately, they were ushered, by the joint efforts of one butler and two footmen, into no more formidable presence than Miss Priscilla Flower's, who was innocently occupying herself with reading a newspaper, and swinging her foot, after that fashion yclept the devil's tattoo.

Reassured by the unconcerned air with which Prissy ordered that formidable person, Mr. Payne, the butler, to let his mistress know there were visitors, all their nervous tremors gave way to high satisfaction at the progress of their adventurous undertaking.

No. 2 (hastening to take advantage of Prissy's lonely situation). "So you live here, Miss Flower."

Prissy. "No, I don't."

A pause.

No. 1. "We have been to the Wood-head to call upon your mother, and not finding you there, and she appearing occupied in gardening—"

Prissy. "Dear, dear, then what a figure she would be!"

No. 2. "An extraordinary bonnet, perhaps."

Prissy. "Yes; she made it herself, and—"

No. 1 (interrupting, fearing the time would slip). "How dull both the Mrs. Ashetons must feel, all alone."

Prissy. "Yes, very."

No. 2. "What could Mr. Asheton mean by going off in this extraordinary manner?"

Prissy. "But he did not; he went by the train."

No. 1. "She means leaving his wife and mother; that we think so odd."

Prissy. "Mrs. Asheton would not go; and Marion remained to take care of her."

No. 2. "But why did Mrs. Trevor not remain with her mother, and take care of her?"

Prissy. "Yes, indeed; why didn't she? I suppose she would not."

No. 1. "Mr. and Mrs. Asheton did not quite agree, did they?"

Prissy. "Quarrel, do you mean? As if any one could quarrel with May."

No. 2. "Of course not; but it appears so strange to all the country that he should leave her."

Prissy. "Well, and I quite agree with them all; it does look very strange."

No. 1. "Was there any reason for it, do you know? I mean any real cause for him to go."

Prissy. "Oh, yes; very good cause. He went because he would go."

Here the entrance of Mrs. Asheton, accompanied by Marion, put a stop to further picking of Prissy's brains, and the conversation took another form, in which the weather, the crops, and the road took the place of interest, instead of Mr. and Mrs. Asheton and their children.

"I am heartily glad we went," exclaimed *No. 1*, as she settled herself in her carriage.

"So am I. You may be sure there is something wrong, Priscilla was so very deep. And did you notice young Mrs. Asheton when I mentioned Billy's being left in the carriage?"

"Yes, she got scarlet; perhaps they have quarrelled about the children."

"I remember hearing she could hardly read or write. How absent she is; just as if she was thinking of anyone in the world rather than the person to whom she is speaking, and so gone off."

"She never can be plain, she is so elegant; but I have always noticed that quiet, elegant people have never anything in them."

"How very clear her eyes are! Have you never heard that that sort of eyes betokens bad temper or insanity?"

"No, never."

"Well, then, mark my words; some of these days we shall discover Mr. Asheton had very good reasons for carrying off his children. I always thought he married in too great a hurry."

"Poor thing! Well, she must always look pretty, and it will probably be a very mild fit, if she has what you prognosticate."

So the neighbourhood grew calm, waiting in patience for the grand catastrophe that it was bruited about would some day happen at Asheton Court.

Sir Robert Fane had had a jovial year. Everything prospered with him. Now that his luck was in, it would be folly not to take advantage thereof. He would run down to Asheton Court to see how they were all getting on, and, in the elation of his own spirits, he trusted to find Marion not unhappy. She was very good to his boy, and it behoved him to be grateful. He would be glad to see she was not pining; it would give him a sort of confidence and hope that the ensuing year would be as fortunate as this. In fine, he was anxious to discover whether there was any chance of the return of Godfrey; if his very meritorious ideas regarding his children's education still remained paramount.

Sir Robert, flushed with prosperity, hardly knew what he thought, but that it would be "devilish hard" if he was not allowed the run of the Rollinston estates for a few years more; going on as successfully as this year, he might soon be able to buy back his patrimony, and then he would not care a toss-up for the Rollinston property.

Never was a more cruel case than his.

Is Sir Robert singular in this? I trow not; we have all our turns as we think.

Mrs. Asheton, for instance. Amid all her new feelings, nay, made stronger by their strength, arose the pang that she was neglected by her own children; and when most in need of their presence, to bless and brighten her declining days, the further they had removed themselves from her.

She said little, but she pined over the thought in secret.

Sir Robert found her more altered than anyone at Asheton Court, unless it was his own boy, whom he did not know, with ruddy cheeks, short hair, and a schoolboy's jacket.

"Mrs. Asheton is very feeble, Priscilla," said he, one day, to his amiable *confidante*.

"Yes; May thinks some one ought to write to tell Mr. Asheton. She has said as much as she can in her letters, but, you know, he is such a ridiculous man, of course he thinks she is making the worst of it to get her children home."

"They have been gone more than a year now, does he not think of returning?"

"No, that he does not; and I'll tell you what it is, Sir Robert, he's afraid."

"Afraid!"

"Yes, that he is; he has had to take the children away to the sea-side, because they are pale, and he has had to write to Marion to send him directions about their clothes, and how the English nurses dressed and washed them, and all that; for the Italian ones, he allows, are very untidy, which you know means dirty. Think of the Asheton children not being clean and tidy. I'm so glad."

And Prissy looked very "vengeably" stern.

"You think, if he heard of his mother's failing strength, he would return?"

"He ought to. And as I don't wish to think any worse of him, I'll go as far as to say, of course he will."

"Do you think I had better write?"

"A very good idea—go and do it now."

"Or suppose I went to tell him?"

"Much better—pack up, and be off at once."

"No, that would be rash. I might alarm Mrs. Asheton, and put Marion into a flutter of expectation which might end in disappointment."

"To be sure that's very true."

"I will remain the few days longer that I intended, and then go, as if it was all in the course of arranged events. Your sister is still in Rome?"

"Indeed, I don't know. Mrs. Trevor wrote that she hoped to persuade her to go to Sorrento with them. Have you heard about Julian?"

"No, do tell me."

"Such a fellow! Fancy his attacking Mr. Asheton, and wanting to fight him, and all that, only May does not know. Mrs. Asheton would not let her see Mrs. Trevor's letter. He ought to be put into a madhouse again. It is a great pity he was ever let out."

"Does your sister mention anything about it?"

"No, only Mrs. Trevor, and it is ever since her letter that Mrs. Asheton has been fretting. She fancies he will kill Mr. Asheton, or something. But I don't care, as long as he does not hurt May."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN OLD FRIEND TURNS UP.

SIR ROBERT felicitated himself upon his prudence and forethought.

"If I had gone to the duke's now, instead of coming here, my friend Priscilla might have been moved to write to Asheton herself, and the first thing I should have heard about it would have been that they were here; and so lose all the advantages of this year. I think I must certainly go to Rome, now they are settled there again. Nothing like seeing for one's self. A little word here and there might help me to another year's peace and comfort. That is, if I can do it without compromising myself. Of course, I must think of Marion, she has been very good to my boy. Halloo there, what can be in the bushes? Come out, will you?"

Sir Robert had been holding this interview with himself in a shrubbery adjacent to the walled garden, and startled by a rustling in the laurel fence that hid the brick walls from the flower-garden, he dashed into it, and succeeded in pulling out a young gentleman, handsome as Apollo.

"Count Julian!" exclaimed Sir Robert. "You here again!"

"Even so," responded the count in Italian. "I am here; I intend no harm. I came but to look at her."

"I thought you had been cured of attempting to thrust yourself in Mrs. Asheton's way, five or six years ago?"

"Ah, no, no, not twice those years. I have seen her—aha!—I looked—I have had that beatification." (At least it was thus Sir Robert translated his words in his own mind.)

"Are you aware that you are liable to be taken up for a trespasser, or perhaps shot for a poacher?"

"I care not; Beatrice bid me come; she had reasons."

"The devil she had! Surely you don't think Mrs. Asheton will receive you, or speak to you, now her husband is absent."

"I know not, he is cruel, unkind, he leaves her, he takes her loves, her children; she will not like him much."

"Did Beatrice tell you all this?"

"Yes, and more; you have a new law, now it is passing your

parliament. If he, if that man, that heart of stone man, leaves her two times, two years, she shall be free, she may be mine, she shall be mine, I have sworn it, I swear it, when she Marion, la mia Mariana Flower."

Aghast at the rapidity with which Miss Flower had brought her little atom of thought (which had once come in contact with his) into bud, Sir Robert still felt there was some urgent necessity for her promptitude.

"Go," said he, "to the lower walk by the brook; I will come to you in an hour. We must not be seen talking together."

"Beatrice said, if I saw you, I was to bid you take heed."

Sir Robert spent this hour in a conflict; not exactly betting his right hand against his left, but certainly upholding his good and bad angels in equal measure.

"I must not be unfeeling to Marion, poor little thing; she will never have anything to say to this half-mad count, of that I am certain. She is not one of your flighty, revengeful women, who will enter into a flirtation, and damage their character by way of a fine reprisal to a cool husband. She is safe, at all events, there. I'll uphold her myself, as long as I have a tongue that can speak. Her fair fame shall not be hurt; and I am much mistaken in the sagacity of Miss Beatrice if she does not think the same. I presume it is Asheton who is to be the scape-goat in this case; the safest plan will be for me to do as I had intended, go to Rome, only I will be off sooner. I cannot divine the young lady's tactics, but they are pretty bad ones, to judge by the beginning. Now, I don't intend to be drawn into anything dishonourable. Whatever her intentions may be, I shall confine myself to a little innocent plot for keeping Asheton abroad for another year or two. I owe it to Marion to take her part."

Oh, sad, sad was the air of the better angel, as she flew up at sunset to record the thoughts and deeds of Sir Robert Fane.

But he went to sleep in high content with himself. He had seen the count, comforted him, sent him off to a remote shooting-box belonging to a friend, announced his intention of going to Rome, had given orders for his departure, and left both the Mrs. Ashetons sitting up writing letters of which he was to be the envied postman. In his dreams he was constantly haunted by a pale anxious face, looking at him with yearning eyes.

Indeed, matters were not comfortable in that beautiful and spacious palazzo.

The pretty, healthy, rosy children were pale, untidy, cross. Their nurses unable to control that indomitable spirit appertaining to thorough-bred Britons, tried coaxing, bribery, and subterfuges with Mabel; they succeeded in buying good behaviour at the expense of her health, she being amenable to the charm of sugar plumbs.

Issa had her own way, coaxed or not, and Rupert gloried in being naughty, frankly confessing his sins, as if they had been so many virtues. In no possible way could either of the elder children be induced to hide a fault committed by themselves or their attendants from their father. So Mr. Asheton began to imbibe a knowledge of human weaknesses, the existence of which he might have heard of, but never experienced, in his own home. And the knowledge did not add to his happiness.

Mrs. Trevor's advice was of no avail, for the children were as rude and disobedient to her as to their nurses; and she had private reasons of her own for avoiding, if possible, a war between her and her brother's children. She was more than suspicious that his heart began to fail him. She was painfully conscious that he longed for and lingered over Marion's letters with a degree of affection and interest he had not shown before, while he read aloud with evident pleasure all those passages in his mother's letters that referred to her.

"Marion appears determined to keep pace with us, Ellinor," he remarked; "my mother says she can translate French and Italian with ease, though she can speak neither, from having no instructor."

"Which latter is necessary, the other almost useless my dear brother."

"Not so, I fancy, Ellinor; at all events, it shows great application, besides a wish to gain general information. How pleasant it is to hear this account of Edward!"

And Mr. Asheton sighed.

"Ah, my dear Godfrey, would that I could believe all our dear mother says! She never saw a fault in those she loved."

"True. I think it would be well to select, among the number we know, a governess or tutor; I will write to Fane about it. Marion ought to be encouraged, and Edward would benefit also."

"Very kind; remarkably judicious in you, my dear Godfrey. By this means you will avoid any little unpleasantness when you return home. It would indeed be painful to you to have to

introduce your talented and clever children to an ignorant mother."

"I have been glad to learn to day that Rupert shows a disposition for painting; not that I wish him to become a proficient; he has other more important things to learn; but it is essential that he should know enough to be able to pass judgment, and that correctly, on every other painter. I enjoy a return to this beautiful terrace, Ellinor."

"Just what I said to Trevor; how charming it is to return home!"

"Home! Oh, no, not home; I cannot fancy any place home without my mother and my dear Marion. But I must leave you to write my letters. I should not like to lose a post in communicating with Fane."

"I trust his presence will do as well, my dear Asheton," said that worthy gentleman, who was at the moment being bowed on to the terrace, with all the best grimaces and gesture of the Majordomo.

They were highly delighted to see him, after the first shock. Why is it that the sudden appearance of one supposed to be far away should bring a fresh rush of fear with it? Is it because we deserve sorrow more than joy? Each heart must answer for itself.

Never was anyone so welcome. Never had Sir Robert appeared so gay, so *debonnaire*. Exhilarating as his presence had always been at Asheton Court, at no time was it more appreciated than now, scarcely ever felt so opportune and happy.

Moreover, he gave by degrees so delightful an account of all at home, the health and happiness of Mrs. Asheton—"to be sure, she was a little feeble, that must be expected,"—the beauty and goodness of Marion,—“certainly she was a little mopish now and then after the children, but she bore up capitally on the whole, and galloped all over the country with Edward.

"We hear he is wonderfully improved, Robert," said Mrs. Trevor, a slight touch of vinegar in her voice.

"Pretty well, pretty well," answered Sir Robert, who detected the vinegar; "Marion is so truly kind, takes such pains; but there was, I fear, so much room for improvement, that Edward appears to advantage from comparing the past with the present."

Mrs. Trevor cast a glance of triumph at her brother, which was lost upon him, but caught by Sir Robert.

"They lead such quiet, regular lives that really the time goes,

according to their statement, on a double set of wings. Mrs. Asheton told me, only the night before I left, it hardly appeared six months since you left."

(Oh, Sir Robert, why did you not mention the antithesis to this remark?)

"It has appeared very, very long to me," remarked Mr. Asheton.

"Ah, yes; doubtless you are not the careless fellow I am, Asheton; you live your daily troubles through. Now, I gallop over mine, and those I don't crush, I leave behind. How are all the young ones?"

A year had done much to obliterate the remembrance of their mother from the children's mental vision, though not from their hearts. They had seen so much, done so much, travelled backwards and forwards until one thing drove another from their remembrance, and they found the objects and duties of the day were about as much as they could retain.

Besides, Sir Robert Fane was not so well known to them as Miss Flower had been.

They were sent for; the Miss Trevors approached, faultless in deportment and dress, though not so in beauty or figure. They were, however, greatly improved, and but for a thin, faded look, promised to be pretty. They were tall, and very slim, approaching their teens. They had little falsetto voices, exactly the same, and reminded Sir Robert of machines wound up, and made to speak certain words, and no more. They paid their compliments to the stranger uncle, after a law ruled and filed for them, and which that stranger uncle felt he was doomed to endure every morning and evening that he remained in Rome.

A noisy altercation heralded in Master Asheton. He was a noble boy. With his magnificent curls all in confusion, his dress all tumbled, his face stained, and his fingers inked, he was yet such a picture of boyish beauty, Sir Robert Fane could scarcely refrain from an open exclamation.

"You are my uncle," said the boy, marching straight up to Sir Robert, and looking into his face with the eyes and frank gaze most peculiarly his mother's.

"Rupert, you should not have appeared thus untidy," remarked his father.

"So Philipo said, papa; that was the noise you heard. Uncle, do you come from England?"

"Yes, straight from there."

"Did you ever see my mamma?" and, like a cloud in a summer sky, came a dark trouble in those clear eyes.

"Yes, often; I have just left her."

"And why does she not come to see me?"

"Do you remember your grandmother?"

"An old lady with white hair, and eyes like hers."

And he glanced over his shoulder at Mrs. Trevor in a disdainful fashion that delighted Sir Robert.

"Well, she is very old, and must not be left alone; your mamma is so good, she takes care of her, while your father takes care of you."

Godfrey felt life itself would not suffice to repay to Sir Robert his debt of gratitude for a reply so judicious, so apt.

The boy's face beamed with pleasure, and the same dimples that rose and vanished in Marion's face, played on his.

He took his uncle's hand in his, and kissed it, after the manner of foreign children, with a childish grace, saying, "Thank you uncle. When you see my grandmamma again, tell her we spare mamma to her, but to no one else." Then, turning to his father, he sprang into his arms, "Forgive me, papa; I will now go and make myself quite a gentleman, fit to hand in those great ladies, Isabel and Mabel," and he bounded from their presence on the instant.

"What a noble boy—how like his mother!" exclaimed Sir Robert.

"Too much so in some things, I fear," murmured Mrs. Trevor.

"He is somewhat wilful, no more," said Godfrey to Sir Robert, unheeding Mrs. Trevor; "but so intelligent, so sagacious, we spoil him rather. His tutors scarcely know how to restrain his energy; therefore we have not yet learnt the happy medium with him. But I can assure you he has an excellent disposition," It was clear to Sir Robert that Godfrey's heart was yet in the possession of this boy.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LITTLE PARTICLES FLOATING ABOUT IN THREE SEPARATE BRAINS
BEGIN TO MEET AND SHOW SIGNS OF LIFE.

WHILE waiting the coming of his children, Mr. Asheton broached his idea to Sir Robert of a tutor for his son, to whom, at the same time, he could intrust the improving of his wife's defective education.

Sir Robert was delighted with the plan, and entered into it with all the zeal Mr. Asheton could wish.

During their pacing to and fro on the terrace, in the fullness of his present feelings, that were touched by the unexpected appearance of one whose opinion he valued, Mr. Asheton disclosed more of his secret thoughts to Sir Robert than he had ever done.

Again had that worthy individual reason to thank fortune for the good prompting that had sent him to Italy. Mr. Asheton was, in fact, upon the very verge of returning home.

"Of course, I consider," said he, "that their health is the most important thing to be regarded. Education, manners, accomplishments, everything, must give way to that; my kind sister did her best to point out to me that their pale cheeks did not proceed from the climate, but the rather because of their growth, instancing my young nieces, who are certainly less robust than I should like. I had arranged everything to return home this spring, but they recovered their bloom by the seaside."

"I think it a pity you should give up so long-contemplated and excellent a scheme because your children have not such rosy cheeks as in England. I should try for another year, if I was you, but not remaining in one city. Stay three months at Naples, three at Florence, run up to Pau for the hot months; try that plan, ere you give all up."

"Your advice is good, certainly; but I begin to fear a father is useless in nursery matters. If Miss Flower was to leave us, as she may do at any moment, I hardly know what I should do. My boy is so wayward, he takes exception to his aunt's interference. She fears from jealousy, but the regard and value I

have for her in no way resembles the love I have for my children. I cannot quite understand it."

"I trust to have a fortnight to spend with you; I will make it my business to think over the whole matter. As a disinterested party (oh!) I may be better able to judge than you."

"Thank you very much. I shall esteem your doing so a great favour. Here are my daughters. You see, their brother is quite a little courtier in his way. He is wonderfully intelligent, and mimics everything he sees or hears."

Rupert, treading daintily, with an assumed air of great importance, led a sister in each hand up to Sir Robert, and made a great pretence of a formal introduction, a part that the young lady, Issa, performed with much gravity, while the infantine Mabel laughed, and showed as many dimples as her brother could do.

Sir Robert, rightly appreciating the manner of the Demoiselle Isabel, gravely bowed, and courteously kissed her little hand, a proceeding evidently much admired by the Master of the Ceremonies, Rupert. But when he would have taken up Mabel in his arms, and kissed her as a loving uncle should, the dimples all disappeared. She shrieked with anger and fright, and would only be pacified in her father's arms. Wonderfully pretty, with a profusion of fairest hair, and singularly large, dark eyes; a mouth, that was the minute counterpart of Marion's—dewy and red as early strawberries.

Godfrey walked away, with his lovely plaything in his arms, to sooth and quiet her.

"Issa," said Rupert, "this uncle has seen our mamma lately. She is so kind; she is taking care of our grandmamma, who is very old."

"I wish to see my mamma myself," said Miss Issa.

"So you will some day," said Sir Robert.

"But, sir, when will that be?"

"Your grandmamma is old."

"Yes," interrupted Rupert; "but we ought not to wish her dead that we may see our mamma; that would not be right. I will wait patiently. Tell my mamma I always see her in my heart."

"Do not be ridiculous, Rupert," interrupted Mrs. Trevor. "Send your love to your mother, and say you hope to be a good boy."

"But I do not hope it. I shall be good, if possible. If not, I shall be naughty."

"You are a very rude boy."

Unheeding Mrs. Trevor, beyond a little look of childish scorn that appeared inimitably diverting to Sir Robert, the boy turned to him.

"Uncle, tell me, do boys in England ride, and fish, and sport?"

"By sport I suppose you mean play, with fun—balls, bats, cricket."

"Oh, uncle!" clasping his hands with entreating looks—"do tell me about them all."

"You know your papa encourages no such follies," interposed Mrs. Trevor.

"Educate your pattern girls, and don't talk to me," said Master Rupert, mimicking her voice.

Sir Robert hardly knew whether to be amused, or to wonder at the sudden changes in his precocious nephew.

And was relieved when Mrs. Trevor angrily took her departure, followed by her daughters.

"I should wish to speak to you alone, Robert; I have much to say to you," she said, as she swept by.

"When he has told me all I wish, then you shall have him," said the saucy boy. Sir Robert could not help thinking that, unknown to himself, Rupert was revenging his mother after an effectual, somewhat irritating fashion; he scarcely wondered at his father's infatuation, he was himself smitten with the boy, so frankly naughty, so bewitchingly ingenious. In the course of that day, he had other confidences poured into his ear, besides those of Mr. Asheton and his son.

Mrs. Trevor, oppressed by fear, and the want of money, forgot that she ought to be clever, and devoid of all weaknesses.

On the contrary, she was really pitiful in her confidence, throwing herself unreservedly into Sir Robert's worldly-wise hands.

"It is perfectly clear, my dear Ellinor, that if Godfrey goes home now, you will be very awkwardly placed. Nearly the whole of Trevor's income, you say, is mortgaged for this building, and will be so for three years to come."

"Exactly so. Trevor is a perfect child in business; indeed, it is owing to me that we have anything left."

"And you wish me to use any influence I may have in persuading Godfrey to remain abroad that time. It will be very hard upon his wife."

"Far from it, Robert; she is not the sort of person to feel

anything. It was such an unfortunate marriage. Look at that boy, a regular Flower, though, I must say, Beatrice is quite different. If Godfrey had only married her, she is so perfectly one with me in thought and opinion—”

“But perhaps not so with Godfrey, which is of more consequence. However, we have got a new law about to be enforced in England. Divorce will be easy, and separation a trifle.”

“Pray, pray, Robert, be serious, and don’t jest upon what can never occur.”

“‘Never’ is a word I don’t use. I have lived to see ‘never’ very often permanent ‘ever.’ Therefore I have exploded it from my dictionary.”

“You do not feel for me, Robert.”

“Upon my soul, I do, most deeply; though I am not in a condition to prove it openly.”

Mrs. Trevor might have been comforted, had she known that he had very good reasons of his own for feeling strongly on the subject; but, being unhappy herself, she was incapable of thinking that any other person was uncomfortable too. And he had no mind to return her confidence.

His private interview with Miss Flower was shorter, but more explicit.

“You sent your cousin over to Asheton, I presume, to create a little mischief.”

Her eyes gleamed angrily.

“If you wish me to help you, you must confide in me wholly. Have you any reason to suppose that Marion, disgusted at her husband’s conduct, will, by way of revenge, flirt a bit with the count?”

“No! But people talk, and the report will be enough for Mr. Asheton, after his sudden visit before.”

Oh, oh! that’s your plan, is it? Well, he has been advising me to get a tutor for my boy, and Marion is to participate in the advantage. Do you think Julian’s wits sufficiently steady to take the place under a disguise?”

“He will do anything to be near Marion.”

“I must think about it a little, Miss Flower, ere I consent.”
She did not seem unhappy at this hesitation.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

PRISSY BECOMES MOROSE.

PERHAPS Miss Flower knew from experience "that he or she who deliberates is lost." For though she had no further communication with Sir Robert, she appeared easy regarding his decision. Not so Mrs. Trevor. The more secret interviews she had, so many the more did she require, until Sir Robert was as well acquainted with all that was passing in her heart, and through her brain, as herself. Indeed much more so, as she would have repudiated a good many of them, had she seen them written down.

Sometimes your sagacious people let out ideas of a very sorry nature, which less wiser folks are without brains to conceive, and may therefore hug themselves with self-complacency, if they have the wit to do it.

"My dear Ellinor, pray allow me to suggest, a slight deficiency in principal runs through your remarks. I don't pretend to much morality myself, but I must decline recommending a married man to look and judge for himself that he has wedded the wrong woman."

"My dear Robert, pray be serious, I confide in you, as one who thoroughly understands what Ashetons are, and what they require."

"That may be; but what motive can I give as a palliative for telling Asheton he ought to have married Beatrice, more especially when I don't hesitate to confess I like Marion better."

"I see you do, like every one else; but, I thank God, Trevor and myself retain the use of our senses, and are not fooled by a pretty face and specious manner."

"I rather like being fooled. But take my advice, and worry yourself no more about a matter you cannot undo. Anyone overhearing us might reasonably take us for backbiters, slanderers, not to say murderers—for did I not hear you lamenting just now that she was so healthy."

"Pray mention her name no more. I am sick of her. Has my brother confided anything more to you of his intentions?"

"I think you may reckon upon another year with safety, but,

beyond that, I would not undertake to answer for a minute. He is beginning to think a little about his wife, for once in his life. 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder,' we have heard. And but that he is rather ashamed to take his children home considerably the worse in manners (that young Rupert swears in *patois* like a native), whatever they may be in languages, he would, I think, go at once. Now he intends trying this plan of so many months' residence in some of the great cities. He will be more amused himself that way, for the moment he is moped, you will see, he is home-sick also. Let the children have again a good English nurse to keep them clean, which it strikes me they are not now. Besides, they will pay more attention to her than to these gesticulating foreigners, for they seem English in every idea."

"So you see that, do you? As I tell Godfrey, it is peculiarly unfortunate that they should have inherited such determined John Bull notions from their mother. Look at my girls."

"If I was an Asheton myself, I should be very proud of my children. I would bring up my boy a thorough Englishman. What a sportsman he would—but I beg your pardon, I am talking treason to you. Get all your letters ready, for I am off to-morrow. I have heard of a tutor, and as he is now in England, there is nothing to detain me."

"My dear Fane," said Godfrey to him that night ere they retired, "there is one little circumstance I wish to mention to you; in fact it is owing to it that I rather thought it better to go home. That young Count di Ramiano is out again—I mean no longer under surveillance. He made a sort of—a kind of absurd attack upon me, which I grieve to say caused a report, in which Marion's name was unfortunately mixed. Miss Flower did all she could to prevent it. It annoyed me extremely. I have not seen him about lately; indeed, I heard casually that he was gone to England. If, in his madness, he should go into—shire, or approach Asheton Court, or, in fact, make any attempt to see Marion, I rely upon your instant information. You remember she fainted, though I believe not on his account—at least she said so. Spare no expense, not only in sending to me, but in expediting my return, by ordering relays of horses, or coming to take charge of my children. If, through my absence, my—my apparent neglect of her, reports should arise, similar to those spread in Rome, I need not tell you, my dear Fane, all happiness would be over for me. I would never see

Asheton Court again. My mother alone knows all I wished upon this very delicate subject, as she was my counsellor before. I have no other on whom to rely but yourself."

"Did ever man have his own fortune thrown into his hands as I have?" thought Sir Robert, as he journeyed home, and reconsidered all that had past. "Or did ever any man throw away his, as poor Asheton might do if it were not for me, for I must be true to Marion, poor little thing; I only want this year, and then I'll back her up through thick and thin, among the whole lot. I'll stake all I have on her. I am rather sorry I wrote to M. Schmid (*alias* the count) about his duties as tutor; I suppose I must let him go for a month or two, as I have raised his hopes. Besides, they will think it very odd at the Court, his non-appearance—having been advertised that he was already in England. Perhaps he won't take kindly to an elderly disguise, or keep himself within bounds. If so, I am well out of any more trouble about him, I shall pack him off back again to his own folks. I will remain just one full day at Asheton Court to tell them all the news, and then I will be off to the count, and give him a week's training in his new harness before I let him go without a bearing rein."

It was with very mixed feelings that he was welcomed at the Court.

Neither Mrs. Asheton nor Marion had been able to refrain from indulging in the hope that the kind, warm-hearted Sir Robert Fane would have so worked upon his brother-in-law as perhaps to bring him home with him, or, at all events, to fix a time for his certain return.

Prissy, who couldn't keep a secret but upon the most solemn terms, had let out all about her conversation with Sir Robert, and how he had gone on purpose to tell Mr. Asheton that his mother had become weak and feeble, only longing to see him ere she died.

A hope that his return was inevitable had brightened Marion's eyes and cheeks, while old Mrs. Asheton went further and ordered a great airing of beds, a preparing of good things, and a general sort of brushing up of every corner. The little that Sir Robert had to say on a subject which engrossed them wholly, fell with a leaden weight upon Marion's heart, with a cruel blow upon Mrs. Asheton.

His reluctance to say anything, his avoidance of the subject, impressed them both with the same idea, that Godfrey had been urged to return and recorded not the entreats

"My daughter, did my daughter know I wished to see her?" murmured Mrs. Asheton, as the tears of bitter disappointment fell involuntarily from her eyes.

"Pray don't speak to me of Mrs. Trevor," exclaimed Sir Robert, angrily, for in this sensation he felt he might indulge, without detriment to the truth; "I have no patience with her. There is some reason in Godfrey's whims about his children, for I never saw such beautiful, intelligent creatures, but for Mrs. Trevor there is no excuse; pray mention her name no more—it irritates me."

Notwithstanding that this burst of indignation saved him further interrogation, Sir Robert was very uneasy. Marion's face cut him to the heart, and Mrs. Asheton's trembling, agitated disappointment gave him terrible qualms.

"I cannot stay here, Priscilla, any longer, seeing so many miserable faces."

"Well there is no one to stop you going," answered Prissy, sharply. When Prissy was unhappy she was generally cross.

"Who was that personage, for I hardly know what to call her, that you were ushering out of the room when I entered some time ago?"

"She is some Lady Superior of some place, and I don't think her a lady, and I am sure she is not at all superior."

But what is she doing here? How came she on visiting terms at the Court?"

"That's best known to herself. She called on her own account, and brought a tract upon 'Death' with her, and bid May give it to Mrs. Asheton, who, she said, she heard was near her end."

"And what did May answer?"

"Why, she told her that she hoped Mrs. Asheton would be spared to her for some time yet; and as she was always speaking of and preparing for her death, there was no need of the tract."

"Monstrous impertinent!"

"So I thought; but mamma thinks it very kind of her, and she goes in and out of the Woodhead almost as often as the cat. And she wanted me to become a sister. But I said I would not; I have no sisterly feeling for the Lady Superior, and what's more, I don't want to. So, there, that's all I have to say."

CHAPTER XL.

MURDER IS COMMITTED.

MRS. ASHETON failed rapidly. Marion, desirous that her husband should have no cause to think she worried him for her own ends, wrote privately to Mrs. Trevor and Beatrice, both of whom had reasons of their own for taking no notice of the letters.

The new tutor had arrived some time, but, according to orders from Marion, he was not domiciled at the Court. He came every day to the Gothic summer-house, where the fair Diana was still on the verge of hunting, and gave Edward his lesson. "For myself," she wrote to Sir Robert, in explanation of these arrangements, "I have not the time to spare from my mother to take any advantage from Edward's tutor; neither can I have her quiet and domestic privacy intruded upon by the presence of a stranger."

"Tumtity-ti; here's a spirit. Who would have thought it? I admire her all the more for it. Now I need trouble myself no more about the count; she will be a match for him."

Thus thought Sir Robert Fane, and went off to Chester races in high spirits.

But he was not fortunate there, so he returned to his own house rather low. He thought it as well just to look over his affairs, and see how he was getting on in the desirable object of reclaiming his paternal property. Things did not look so flourishing as he had expected; allowing two full years to elapse of certain possession of the Rollinston property, he must yet depend a good deal upon a few strokes of luck.

"Let me have but one or two lucky goes, and then I'll set about getting Asheton home, and making that dear little Marion happy once more. I am convinced I owed all my ill-luck at Chester to the remembrance of her poor wistful face. I saw it above the head of every horse; it was peeping at me out of every crowd; and if I looked up into the air, there were those two melancholy eyes gazing full at me. I wonder how the count gets on; what a devil of a row there would be if Asheton was to discover his doings!"

Sir Robert might have had a great deal more to think about,

but he was interrupted by a commotion at the front door. Ere he had time to rise from his chair, in rushed the count, with the clothes and habits of a venerable tutor, but without the wig, spectacles, or paint, or whatever he had to disguise him.

The count's story was very short. After having waited with more patience than Job ever thought of exercising, much less was capable of performing—after unwearied submission to his hateful task—after troubles, annoyances, disappointments, agonies—he had succeeded in obtaining one interview with “Marion;” and in that interview, before he had uttered two words, she recognised and dismissed him—dismissed him with a dignified indifference that was harder to bear than astonished anger.

“Shall I hate her? Oh, I will—I must. I will sacrifice her, and assassinate myself.”

That was the real summing up of a two hours' rhapsody, during which Sir Robert had serious thoughts of sending for a keeper to carry him off to a lunatic asylum.

“Be calm, my dear count; pray be less violent.”

“Did she say she would write to Mr. Asheton?”

“No, no; she say nothing but ‘go, go; nothing but you being foreigner prevents me from sending for the police.’ Oh, how I hate her! Ah, Mariana mia!” The count passed from the angry to the pathetic mood, in less time than Sir Robert could draw a breath.

“Did she say she would write to me?”

“No, no; but the police. Oh! those police. I would have assassinated the police.”

Come, come, no more of that. I shall have a letter from her to-morrow, perhaps.”

“Ah! a letter about me—a letter! Shall I see it? Oh, Signor Roberto, I will see that letter.”

“So you shall, and you may keep it also. And now, pray go to bed; time will pass quicker in sleep than in any other way.”

Sir Robert, to use his own phrase, was in a deuce of a mess. He heartily wished he had had nothing to do with the count. A very bad book he had made in this business; and what was worse, there was no likelihood of his being able to hedge his bets. He trembled for the post. But he was perplexed, and the count in despair—there was no letter from Marion.

“I shall wait a week or two,” said Sir Robert; “and then if I don't hear, I shall run down, and see whether she suspects me or not. Meantime, if I was you, I would return to Italy.”

Sullen and angry, the count made no reply; but, to Sir Robert's infinite relief, he took his departure that evening. He vouchsafed no information as to his intentions; but as long as he got rid of him, Sir Robert was not curious to know.

But as days went on, he felt rather ashamed of meeting those clear eyes, and he wrote, instead, the usual sort of letters, as if all was as he had left it.

He would liked to have written to his *confidante*, Prissy, inquiring particulars from her; but he knew she was eccentric about her letters. For instance, if the post came at an inopportune moment, such as when she was in the middle of hemming a frill, or knitting a stocking—the letters might have contained news of a most startling character, even that the comet had already touched the earth, and it was beginning to blaze away not far off—not one word would Prissy read until the hem was finished, or the round of the stocking knitted to the proper point. But she compromised herself in this way:—she would beg anyone to open her letters, and read aloud what there was important. Therefore, if Sir Robert's confidential letters should arrive at one of those important periods, there was no knowing who might open it. Time passed on, and he was almost oblivious of the matter, when he received a letter from Prissy herself, short and characteristic:—

“DEAR SIR ROBERT,—If I was you, I would come here and see how ill Mrs. Asheton is, and then I would go and bring Mr. Asheton home, whether he will or no. May does not know I am writing, therefore you need not tell her; and I don't want an answer, because the only one necessary is that you come.

“I remain, yours, &c.,

“PRISCILLA FLOWER.”

He went. When he arrived at Asheton Court, it was one of those lovely August days in which everything is tinged with the warm hues of a ripe summer. A universal stillness of the air, the absence of song among the birds, or humming from insects, gave the idea that nature, having fulfilled her summer work, was resting. The heat was great, but not unpleasant, enjoining relaxation, but not lethargy; for the sky was too blue, the air too clear, and the whole scene too exquisite to be forgotten for a moment. To a poet, it might have appeared that nature paused in her daily work, to contemplate the loveliness of her handiwork, and, in pausing, grew too enamoured of it to pursue

her labours. Sir Robert was not indifferent to the beauty of the weather.

"What a glorious day for the Derby this would be. One could see miles without one's glass."

"The ladies were out in the garden," Mr. Payne informed him. "A very great change in Madam Asheton; surprising Mr. Asheton did not return. The young madam was looking extremely pale and anxious. Madam Asheton was perhaps a trifle better; out to-day for the first time for six weeks. Master Fane excellently well; charming young gentleman—so amiable to his grandmamma and aunt." This was Mr. Payne's running commentary to Sir Robert, as he divested him of his travelling costume.

When he had shaken off the dust, and he was ready to go and see them, Sir Robert hazarded this question:—

"What about my boy's tutor? He went off, did he not, Payne?"

"I believe so, sir; I was not informed of any reason."

Satisfied that all was pretty safe, and that Marion had thought no more of the matter, Sir Robert, having declined Payne's further escort, went to seek for the ladies. He thought he heard voices in the rose garden, and was bending his steps there, with the leisurely air of your man of the world, who is never seen in a hurry or perturbation, even if the pole of an omnibus is touching his back, when a succession of shrill screams thrilled through the still air, shooting right into his ear. One bound, and he was in the midst of a strange group: Mrs. Asheton apparently dead in her chair, Marion hanging over her, unheeding the count, on his knees before her, clasping her dress; while Prissy was tugging at his coat with all her best energies, and uttering at the same time, with equal vigour, those startling shrieks.

CHAPTER XLI.

IN WHICH SIR ROBERT FANE TAKES A LONG JOURNEY AGAINST HIS WISHES.

It took Sir Robert but a moment to free Marion from the count's grasp, which done, Prissy hung tightly on to him, shriek-

ing louder than ever; nor did she cease until, a crowd of servants having run from all quarters, she was enabled to see Julian in the safe custody of half a dozen of them.

Meantime, in obedience to Marion's low cries, "Oh, my mother—carry in my mother," Sir Robert had lifted Mrs. Asheton's lifeless form from the chair, and borne her into the house.

Even as he did it, Marion had given the several orders that were necessary for such an emergency; and by the time Mrs. Asheton was laid on her bed, the doctor had been sent for, and the remedies in the house ready.

Unable to do more, Sir Robert left Marion carrying them into effect, and joined Prissy, who was sobbing and scolding with equal vehemence.

"Oh, Sir Robert, he has killed her, that fellow—and what's to become of us all?"

As for getting anything like a coherent story from Prissy, it was impossible, beyond the fact of Mrs. Asheton and May having been together in the garden; Stephenson and Prissy had left them, the one to gather lavender, and the other to seek for a ripe peach, and Prissy supposed that the count took advantage of their absence to intrude upon the other two. Mrs. Asheton could not be left for a moment, so he might have been "frightening them to death" the whole time she was away, quite a quarter of an hour. She heard voices, rather excited and unusual, and could not think what it meant. Then, when she turned in through the gateway—

"Oh! Sir Robert, I thought I should have died; he had got hold of Marion, that fellow; but how she spurned him, and then poor Mrs. Asheton gave that terrible cry, and May ran to her, and I caught hold of that fellow, and I think I screamed, but I can't be certain; however, I know he should have pulled my arms off before he got away."

When the doctor arrived, he gave no hope of Mrs. Asheton surviving the night; at the same time informing Sir Robert that her state of health had been such for some time, that he had been fearing an attack of paralysis; nothing but young Mrs. Asheton's extreme care had warded it off so long. A sudden shock, such as Mrs. Asheton appeared to have received from the unexpected appearance of some madman, would fully account for the fit. It would be useless for Sir Robert to set off in search of Mr. Asheton; it was utterly impossible that he could arrive in time to see Mrs. Asheton alive. He had much better wait, and be of service to the young lady, who would require it

ere morning. Meantime, as he could for the present be of no further use upstairs, he had better carry off the person who had caused this terrible catastrophe, and place him in safe custody.

All this being done, Prissy and Sir Robert were left to get through the rest of this melancholy evening, as best they could.

Prissy found great comfort in talking, but her words fell on heedless ears. Sir Robert was wholly occupied in thinking what would become of him now. Dr. Ford returned about eleven, and they all three kept a melancholy vigil together, during which Sir Robert had to listen to his companion's strictures upon the culpable undutifulness of Mr. Asheton and Mrs. Trevor.

At three o'clock, at that moment when the dawn begins with calm, but mighty, power to bid dark night retire, withdrawing from the world the veil of sleep, and waking it to light, to life, to work, they were sent for to the chamber of death. How often does it happen that this hour brings to the wearied soul that everlasting dawn of which it is the type.

They drew near with solemn awe. On the pillow, by the dying woman, sat her devoted companion and daughter. In the same dress she wore in the garden, with the little lace 'kerchief yet round her throat, her fair redundant hair gathered up, with all its rich luxuriance of curls, in a cluster behind her ears, the pure and faultless profile looking in the dim light, with the shadows from the thick crimson curtains, as if cut out from the polished rosied cameo shell—the spectators might well think that the departing soul was sustained and comforted by the bodily presence of one already in the exalted position of a saint in heaven. As the first ray of the sun entered the chamber, the soul of Mrs. Asheton departed.

"She is released," said Marion. Tenderly she kissed the dead face, and closed the dimmed eyes. Then with a deep sigh, as if in that she breathed forth the pang that no more could she do, she turned to Sir Robert—

"You will go, perhaps, and seek Mr. Asheton; he will have sufficient to regret in not being here to perform this last duty, that I have now done, without the additional grief that he cannot place his mother by the side of our father."

"Where is he?" asked Sir Robert.

"We know not; otherwise I would have asked you to telegraph. They were about to leave Florence, but had not decided where to go."

She passed on, motioning all to follow, leaving the dead alone with her faithful servant and the housekeeper.

Though bewildered by the sudden crash that appeared to have fallen upon all his schemes, and the utter change that must now immediately take place, he did not dare to gainsay her one word, or to detain her for further debate. There appeared to him nothing left to do, but to obey her.

Sending for Mr. Hearn, the agent, he begged him to make ready every arrangement for the funeral, on the same scale that had been thought necessary for the daughter and husband gone before. Anything requiring further consideration he was to refer to Mr. Flower or Doctor Ford; and, leaving messages with Priscilla for Marion, whom he did not again see, he departed on his painful errand.

Worse than painful. He was going to his own destruction, speaking mildly, and it was necessary to go headlong to it, if he meant to bring Mr. Asheton back in time for his mother's funeral.

Once or twice he had serious thoughts of what he termed "bolting." A man was justified in thinking of himself before any one else; he ought, if he did rightly by himself, to go home, sell off his horses, reduce his establishment, and put everything entirely on the strictest routine regarding economy. One thing alone deterred him. He knew there were two other people as desirous as himself to prevent Godfrey's return home.

"Women stick at nothing," thought he; "when they want their own way, they may hit upon some plan. Far be it from me to advise anything injurious to Marion (really she is too good for this world—what a heavenly creature she looked!); but still I may be ten days or a fortnight finding Asheton, and, of course, the funeral may be over. (I fixed this day fortnight as the latest day for it, with Hearn.) He may be disgusted—he was fond of his mother. However, the chances are so bad, the maddest fool would not take the heaviest odds in my favour. No, the first stoppage I have, I'll write off home, desire everything to be sold, and apply for the consulship. Marion ought to be considered now; and if I think of her as happy, why, perhaps I may not be so wretched out there, after all. But he does not deserve her; it would serve him right—no, that would punish her more than himself. He is a stone, a stock. I wonder what the count said or did to shock poor Mrs. Asheton into her grave. Some plot hatched by that—she's a woman, and I hold

it wrong to call them ill names, but that Beatrice put him up to this outrage, I'll bet two to one in hundreds."

But if we are to follow the course of Sir Robert's thoughts all through the journey, endless would be the task. The pith of them was contained in the above, beginning, continuing, and ending it. But it augured well for poor Marion, that the natural hilarity of his disposition failed him, and so far from rising superior to Fate, as heretofore, the nearer he approached the goal of it, the more depressed was he.

He was, however, faithful to her in one thing (though perhaps speeded by a nervous design to know his own fate), and that was, he lost no time on the road. In something less than five days he reached Florence, only to find they had gone to Nice. He rested twelve hours on the strength of Mr. Asheton's being so much of the way towards home, and arrived at Nice in time to learn that they had left to go to Monaco, as being cooler and more private for the children's bathing, and the enjoyment of the sea breezes. The lack of accommodation, such as they had considered necessary, besides discovering that Monaco was hotter than Nice, owing to its rocky, shadeless situation, had driven them from there, only two days before. Tracing them from place to place, Sir Robert came up to them at Pau, on the very day appointed for Mrs. Asheton's funeral.

CHAPTER XLII.

IN WHICH MORE MURDER IS ATTEMPTED.

As Sir Robert drove up to the hotel, Mr. Asheton's servants were removing the luggage from his travelling carriages.

Standing by one of them, in company with some of the maids, as having none among them whose duty it was to collect her packages, and being therefore necessitated to look after them herself, stood Miss Flower. She left them all to their fate, as she recognised Sir Robert Fane.

"You are the bearer of some bad news," she whispered.

"Mrs. Asheton is dead, killed suddenly by some communication made by your cousin Julian."

In spite of every effort, Miss Flower could not conceal a strong emotion showing itself on her countenance.

Whether of joy, grief, or surprise, Sir Robert was unable to determine. Handsome as she was, she reminded him of a cat playing with a mouse. "Come, come at once to Mrs. Trevor; you must break it to her first." And she led him swiftly by the hand upstairs. She paused in the anteroom, for she heard Mr. Asheton's voice speaking to her sister.

"I have to apologise, Ellinor, for Rupert's ill-behaviour; yet I know not how to punish him. He spoke the strict truth, and I fear Emma or Etta have not done so."

"Had he been any other than your child, Godfrey, I never could have forgiven him. Let the matter rest now; I consent to our having separate houses; and while I take care to superintend everything at yours, for your comfort, the children can be kept perfectly apart from my daughters."

"So be it," said Mr. Asheton. "I have left them, likely to be very comfortably settled in a short time, next door; the courier having made the arrangement, according to my wishes, as you know. Therefore we found everything ready. You will stay here, I suppose."

"I suppose so. Trevor has gone to make arrangements."

"Then farewell for the present."

In vain Beatrice tried to escape with Sir Robert. Mr. Asheton had confronted them ere they could turn.

"Marion?—my mother?" exclaimed Godfrey.

Sir Robert felt the room turning round; all that he had intended to say, all his self-possession, almost the power of speech, left him.

Dragging him into the room where Mrs. Trevor was alone, Mr. Asheton, with the white face of strong anguish, besought him to speak.

Miss Flower locked the door, and stood by it, as if to keep aloof—yet guard intrusion during a grave and solemn moment.

"Marion, Marion?" asked Godfrey, with troubled vehemence.

"Well, well—quite well," gasped Sir Robert.

"My mother?" slower, more sadly was the question asked.

"Not so well, not well, very ill."

"It is on her account you seek me?"

"Yes, 'tis on her account—solely on her account."

"Miss Flower, might I trouble you?" said Godfrey in his stately manner. "I would pass out—my servants must not unpack. I start for England in an hour."

"You have not heard all," said Beatrice, in a low, compassionate voice.

"Is my mother dangerously ill, Robert?" demanded Mrs. Trevor, who had hitherto been wrapped up in a private grievance of her own. Miss Flower's significant glance was not lost upon her. Then, as if recalling the letters she had received, of which Mr. Asheton knew nothing. "She is dead. Oh, heavens! is my mother really gone?"

"She is, indeed," answered Sir Robert, feeling it best to come out with the worst.

Godfrey sunk into a chair, and covered his face with his hands.

"It was very sudden, in the garden. I travelled night and day, but could not come up with you sooner. I did my best. I arranged the funeral was to be delayed a fortnight. 'Tis a fortnight to-day."

"What! shall I not be in time to see my mother again? Oh, Fane, was this well done of you? Where was Marion that she did not write—that she did not warn me? Oh, my mother, my mother, more than ever do I feel how wrong I was to leave you."

Bewildered by this unwonted burst of feeling, Sir Robert could only stammer out:—

"She died in the garden; she had a shock; it was a fit; we knew nothing."

"A fit!" exclaimed Mrs. Trevor; "a shock! Surely Marion neglected no duty? If it is owing to her mismanagement, I shall never forgive myself."

"No, no, no," interrupted Sir Robert; "a thousand times no. It was a madman, some insane person attacked Marion——"

"My cousin, Julian Ramiano," said Miss Flower, calmly.

Mr. Asheton sprung to his feet, and planting himself in front of Sir Robert, essayed to speak. Shocked at the agony expressed in his face, Sir Robert became more and more confused.

"Yes, why, yes; I suppose it was so. I don't know what he did; I wasn't there. He is taken away now. Dr. Ford has got him in charge. If there had been any fear for Marion, I never would have left her."

"Julian has been in England eight months," said Miss Flower.

"And where?" It might have been Mr. Asheton who asked, but the voice was strangely unlike his.

"Ah, about there, somewhere; Marion knew it. I have all the letters; he was disguised."

"The devil is in this woman," thought Sir Robert. "I must to Marion's rescue."

"Marion did not know that, Miss Flower; she saw him but once in the garden, and he was not disguised then."

"I beg your pardon. Much as I should like to believe it, he could not have been your boy's tutor for three or four months, and she not know it."

"I am aware of that disgraceful transaction; but out of tenderness to my brother, I have said nothing." (Oh, Mrs. Trevor, why not add, you learnt it from Marion herself, who entreated you to inform Godfrey, only not telling him herself, lest he should think it a device to ensure his return home? It is dangerous to be too high-minded with the unscrupulous.)

Only to the Searcher of all Hearts could it be known what passed through Godfrey Asheton's heart during this conversation. With a mighty effort, he kept down all outward show; but there was a plaintive sound, like the voice of a woman, as he said:—

"You promised me—you promised me, Fane."

"Well, so I did, my dear fellow. My dear Godfrey, I did my best, and so did Marion. Upon my soul, everything was done that could be done; but really you are yourself to blame. You left her, you know, her children taken away, and all that——"

"Sir, who blamed my wife?" with a burst of passion. Godfrey appeared about to spring upon Sir Robert.

"Godfrey, brother, remember your sister—your Ellinor. We two are alone left now," and Mrs. Trevor threw her arms round him.

"I do not understand you."

Mr. Asheton rather muttered these words than said them, while the crimson colour left his face suddenly, and, alarmed at the ashy paleness that succeeded, Sir Robert forced him into a chair.

"You must, you shall understand me—your Ellinor, your own trusted sister, Our mother's death is not the least we have to suffer."

"The devil is in both these women," again thought Sir Robert, "and has full possession of them. Be a man, Fane, and speak the truth." Aloud: "Ellinor, do not mislead Godfrey. His mother's death was caused by some words or threats that madman used; but no blame, nothing, can be attached to Marion."

"Pardon me; you know nothing, Robert. I have heard

from many other sources sufficient to erase from my heart anything like affection for her you name. And now my mother's unhappy, untimely death bids me, as a sacred duty, spurn her for ever as a sister. The time is not yet come for me to confide to my brother all I could say. But henceforward I devote myself to him only. No one can blame you for taking her part. We have always been aware of her power over you. Leave us, leave my brother and myself alone, to weep together ; we have indeed much over which to mourn, but still we have each other and our children."

Mr. Asheton's head had gradually drooped as his sister spoke. She paused for him to reply.

Struck with his attitude, so motionless, so dejected, Sir Robert took hold of the hand that had been nervously twitching the arm of the chair but a moment before. As he did, Mr. Asheton uttered a loud, strange cry, and fell in strong convulsions upon the floor.



CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SOUL OF SIR ROBERT IS FOUGHT FOR.

IT was late at night, on the ensuing evening, that Sir Robert, Mrs. Trevor, and Miss Flower sat together. Mr. Asheton, having been copiously bled, and carefully attended to by an eminent physician, was pronounced out of all danger ; but the only words he had spoken were to order his servants to convey him into the same house his children inhabited, and once there, he had locked himself up in his apartment, not even admitting his sister Ellinor. The physician had been with him twice, and he had just brought Mrs. Trevor the last report, which was so favourable, Mr. Asheton had dismissed him from further attendance.

Mrs. Trevor. "Then to-morrow I hope to open to my brother our plans for the future."

Sir Robert. "And what are those plans?"

Mrs. Trevor. "Of course he will not now return to England. We shall take up our permanent abode in one of the great

capitals of Europe. The name of Asheton, sullied and breathed upon, is enough of itself to forbid our returning to our first home, even if other very important questions did not render it advisable."

Sir Robert. "And pray, who has sullied the name of Asheton?"

Mrs. Trevor. "Don't argue—don't fly into a rage. I am calm; I mean to be calm; I shall mention no names."

Sir Robert. "Listen to me you shall. In endeavouring to blacken Marion's fair name, and separate her from her husband, you do it to serve your own purposes. You wish to keep your brother to yourself. Accomplish your wish in any way you choose; but you shall not do it at her expense. I am as interested as you are to keep them apart, but hang me if I am villain enough to do it after this fashion, especially now that I know he really regards her."

Miss Flower. "Mr. Asheton suffers because of the disgrace. His wife holds the same place she always did; she is the mother of his children."

Sir Robert. "Miss Flower, that poor girl, that tender mother, endures wrongs in a thousand ways, of which we are not only unconscious, but incapable of realizing, by nature. Do her justice, and I'll lend my help to keep Asheton still abroad. Breathe a word against her, and I am your instant enemy."

A sort of scorn came into Miss Flower's handsome but evil face, as she was about to reply. Mr. Asheton's courier was heard demanding admittance at the door. He brought a letter for Sir Robert Fane, with a message that he was to wait for the answer.

Mrs. Trevor looked strongly inclined to snatch at the letter and open it. Sir Robert felt his hand tremble as he held it. Miss Flower alone had sufficient presence of mind to bid the man wait below. Sir Robert's hand shook with very good reason, while his heart beat painfully. Strange whisperings were in his ears. Had he time to define them, he might have recognised the struggle between his good and bad angels; he might have felt the promptings of conscience bearing down the suggestion of evil. He knew, he was convinced, that letter held his fate, and that fate was in his own hands.

He paused. He endeavoured to recall Marion to his mental vision; he tried to strengthen his mind by remembering her care and love for his boy. He called himself to himself a fool, a blockhead, and many more names; but nothing would do. In

obedience to Mrs. Trevor's repeated wishes, he opened the letter and read it with a sinking heart. It verified his fears; he had not dreaded its contents an atom too much:—

“Tell me, Fane, in one word, can I go home or not? I wait your answer to give my orders.

“GODFREY ASHETON.”

“There, I told you so. I knew how it would be. My brother will be on his way to England to-morrow, and what will become of us?” said Mrs. Trevor.

“Sir Robert has the decision entirely in his own hands,” remarked Miss Flower, reading the letter after Mrs. Trevor.

“Of course; and I know perfectly well what will occur, if he gives way. My brother will go home, become enthralled by his wife, and we shall all of us suffer in consequence.”

“Pray, do not include me,” answered Miss Flower, with an air which she meant should be dignified and proud, but which bore so much of malignity about it, that Sir Robert, occupied as he was, perceived it.

He looked at her with anger. Nothing would please him so much as to “spoil her sport,” as he mentally called it, though she would know all the time he was acting the old proverb, “cutting off his nose to spite his face!” But if he decided for Marion's welfare—would it not be in direct opposition to his own? If he said one word, one little word, he might return to England, a free and unembarrassed man for years. There was a delicious pleasure in the thought—no more worries or fears, or speculations. In four years, he might regain everything—increase his fortune. Mrs. Trevor would then be about wishing to return home; he also would then swear and forswear himself for Marion's sake, and leave nothing undone to see her righted. But Miss Flower would triumph; and how would Marion bear those four years, the good angel was whispering loudly, in melodious pleading tones.

“Good night, Mrs. Trevor,” said Miss Flower. “Not having a servant, it is time that I should go and pack up again.”

“Wherefore?” asked Mrs. Trevor, tremulously.

“We shall all be dispersed to-morrow. I cannot longer be a burden to you. If Mr. Asheton permits it, I shall take advantage of his escort to return to England myself; and you know his movements are rapid—we shall have our ‘marching orders’ at dawn.”

Mrs. Trevor looked piteously at Sir Robert. A knock at the door startled them all. This time it was Mr. Asheton's own valet. "He begged pardon, his master feared the courier had not given a right message about an immediate answer. His master was still far from well, nervous and irritable."

"I had better, yes, I think I will—I will answer the letter in person," said Sir Robert.

"Pardon me, Mr. Asheton's particular orders, would see no one. A letter was the only answer."

"Wait a moment outside then, or go back to Mr. Asheton, and say, Sir Robert has only just been furnished with pen and ink."

"Thank you, sir; that will be better; he will only fret until I return."

"Now, Robert," began Mrs. Trevor, anxiously.

"Well, what do you wish me to say?" he answered, pettishly.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Trevor, helplessly, the tears beginning to fall. She had never felt so like a woman before.

"Tell Mr. Asheton you are no judge of his feelings—that you must have an interview in the morning; then you will tell everything, and he can decide for himself." Thus spoke Miss Flower.

Had Sir Robert looked up, he would have seen an eager, anxious look in her eyes, that might have warned him of some peril in her counsel.

"Yes, yes—excellent," exclaimed Mrs. Trevor; "give me at least one night of rest, after all I have undergone."

"I agree, upon one condition," said Sir Robert: "I may tell Godfrey whatever I like to-morrow."

"Of course," answered his sister-in-law.

"We shall be able to corroborate all you wish," said Miss Flower, with a careless, indifferent air. Sir Robert wrote as she dictated, and without giving himself time to read over his note, sealed and despatched it.

They wait for half-an-hour, in case of another message, but none was sent, even though Sir Robert went himself to inquire at the next house.

"They all appeared to have gone, or were going, to bed," said he, when he returned.

"We had better do the same. I know Trevor has been in bed this hour, little dreaming of my suffering. We meet at breakfast."

This they did, Mrs. Trevor appearing last.

"Have you heard from my brother?"

"No; but I see a letter for you on the mantel-piece." She took it up; it inclosed nothing but a bank post bill for £500.

"What can be the meaning of this?"

"He has gone—he has left." As Mrs. Trevor and Miss Flower uttered these words simultaneously, Sir Robert rushed out of the room. His face told its own tale, when he returned. The next house was empty, not a stray article left to indicate who had been there, or to betoken that they had departed in a hurry. The *Milor Anglais* had left no word of where he was going—had made no declaration of his plans—had delivered no message for anyone. He placed the letter on the mantel-piece himself, and had gone as the day dawned.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE MOURNFUL VIGIL.

THE three conspirators sat silent and confounded. Mr. Trevor made a fourth in the group, only different in being amazed, as well as silent, and not confounded at all.

"Where has he gone?" whispered Mrs. Trevor, as if she feared the sound of her own voice.

"Not to England, that's all I know," answered Sir Robert.

He was beginning to recover; his natural elasticity of spirits rose, now that a certain pressure was removed.

"It is no fault of mine now," thought he; "I meant to have explained everything to-day fully, most fully, and exonerated Marion in every way. I should have detailed to him how well she has conducted herself; how prudent, how good, kind, sensible she is; yes, I should have told him the whole of my mind, but as he would not stay to hear it, of course it is no business of mine now. I can do no more. The leaving behind one of the English servants was rather lucky than otherwise, for, without it, he so concealed his route, we should not have known that he refused to accompany them, because they were to travel still, instead of going home. I must start off back again; but who is to tell Marion? I won't; poor dear thing, what will she do?"

Really, how could I be such a brute as not to think of her first? Upon my soul, I can't and won't tell her—it is too much to ask anyone to do.”

In his excitement, Sir Robert spoke the last words aloud.

“I shall tell her,” said Miss Flower, a little cruel gleam taking possession of her eyes, instead of the blank dismay that had filled them before.

Sir Robert's heart smote him.

“We must talk that over, Beatrice. I will not have her feelings hurt.”

“I intend to return as soon as I hear of an escort,” she answered, as if unheeding him.

“When you go, I shall go,” he muttered.

“What are we to do, Trevor?” asked his lady, meekly.

“Dearest Ellinor, we will do—we will go—we will remain—we will in every way conform to your wishes,” answered he, flattered by this tender mark of confidence.

“But I have no wishes,” said she, tartly.

“Shall we go home, love?”

“We can't.”

“Shall we stay here?”

“I suppose we must. My brother has, I presume, left me this sum of money because of the great inconvenience to which his extraordinary flight has put us. I should wish to mourn for my poor dear mother in retirement. After breakfast, therefore, you will do well to go and seek for some small cottage or *châlet* that will hold us, and take it for three months. I would follow my brother, but that I think it desirable not to suffer our girls to have further intercourse with his children. They are most objectionable in their habits.”

Before the evening had closed, they were settled in a *châlet*, small, but fresh and clean. Sir Robert was gone, and Miss Flower was to follow the next day, escorted by George, the English footman, who had declined further travels in the servitude of Mr. Asheton.

Beatrice did not hurry; she was pretty confident Sir Robert would not face Marion by himself.

Men are mostly cowards where feeling is concerned, and to some of them the sight of their bitterest enemy is not so painful as a woman in tears. Sir Robert was one of these; and as his heart grew heavier every hour that he approached nearer to England, even his last bit of consolation, that he had been uttering to himself the whole way, failed him.

"It is all his own doing, he ought to have let me have that interview. Yes, but instead of being here, I ought to have been there, following him until I found him, and then undeceiving him."

Thus it was with a guilty heart, the look of a criminal, and an ever-repeated fit of nervous trepidation, that Sir Robert Fane drove up to the Wood-head.

For the life of him, he could not go to Asheton Court alone. If Beatrice was not arrived, and he trusted she was not, he should get Mr. Flower to come with him—though what to say when he arrived there, he was utterly unable to decide.

Meantime, let us go to Asheton Court, and see how Marion has borne this time of sorrow and expectation.

After the reverent and loving manner in which she had closed the eyes of her who would have died alone and childless but for the once despised daughter-in-law, Marion, unable to sleep, or rest, for thinking of those so far away, who ought to have been so near, arranged her disordered dress, refreshing her weary frame with cold ablutions, and sitting down by Edward's bedside, read all the loving words of her Lord, promising such blessings to those who die in the faith. When he awoke, she gently broke the intelligence to him, that no more would the kind grandmamma kiss and bless him;—she was gone to his own mamma, the one being whom he had loved.

Anxious to fix upon his volatile mind a due impression of the true meaning of death, Marion bid him rise, and come with her into the garden, where they would gather flowers to place upon all that remained of his grandmother, the only duty he could now perform for her.

Awe-stricken and alarmed, Edward received impressions in his visits to the chamber of death, which they decorated with fresh flowers every day, that were never effaced.

"See," said Marion, "these flowers are like the dead. They die, but their seeds are put into the ground, and they rise again as beautiful as ever. But we are much more so, for we are stamped with the image of God."

"Shall I see my mother as she was when she left me?"

"Yes; but much more beautiful, happy, holy, and bright—no more pain or sickness will she endure."

"I would not be that, Aunt May," pointing to the bed; "I would wish to fly up to heaven at once, as I am."

"What, and take this little sickly body that sometimes aches, is liable to accidents, is filled with naughtinesses, to heaven,

where all is bright, good, and pure. Oh, no, Edward, let us leave our clay dwellings behind, and take the angel forms that God has prepared for those who love Him."

These conversations took place every day; and from the date of them may be traced a dawning of good in the mind of a most wayward boy.

Dragged into the presence of death roughly and suddenly, he might have imbibed fatal ideas of the goodness and mercy of the great Father of us all. But soothed and strengthened by the words and example of his Aunt Marion, he took into his childish heart solemn and lasting ideas of the end of this life, the power he held within him to mitigate its terrors, yet the weakness which instigated him to pray for succour to retain that power; in addition to these thoughts, was the inevitableness of death—there was no escape.

Well was it for Marion she had this work to do, and the reward given her of seeing the good seed taking root. For she mourned after her mother, so suddenly snatched from her; and she carried within her heart a nameless fear, caused by the words of Julian—those words that had killed her mother. She would not permit herself to dwell upon them. They were not true, they were the ravings of insanity. Poor Mrs. Asheton had been startled by his vehemence, alarmed at his manner more than his words, yet they bore on the face of them a certain colour, likening them to that clause in the settlements. How could Julian have learnt that, or, learning it, have retained it in his shattered brain? No more, no more; she must not think of it. Every day might bring her the contradiction.

A week passed. Her mother was now hid from her sight, enclosed within that narrow bed that sufficeth for us all at last, whether we be richer or poorer. There is no distinction except that of outward adornment. Another week went by. Marion arose on the day appointed for the funeral, in that state of quiescent grief that is the result of strong-fortitude. Yet she knew how frail were the bands that held the throbbing heart—how little would break them. When that sad day was passed, and she lay down to rest at night, weary and sick at heart, she rightly judged she owed such feeling to the thought of the grief her husband would feel that his mother was dead and buried, and he not there to mourn her.

CHAPTER XLV

HOW REVENGE IS LESS SWEET TO THE TASTE THAN TO THE
IMAGINATION.

MISS FLOWER had already arrived at the Wood-head, yet she had had no triumph, she was too late. Repellent and disdainful she confronted her fellow-criminal; he, ashamed and pitiful, hardly dare look up.

"He wrote to her himself," she said, as in answer to his look.

"No, no," sobbed Mrs. Flower, who was sitting in a dark corner, indulging in what she called 'a good cry,' "the letter was to Mr. Hearn, the agent. In it he gave directions for a tomb over his father and mother, a few other requests about money, an order to pay Mrs. Asheton two thousand a year, with the liberty of remaining at Asheton Court, and a promise that once in three months she should hear of her children's health. A cruel, cruel letter. Oh, oh!"

"What did Marion say?" asked Sir Robert, almost in a whisper.

"I have not seen her," answered Beatrice; "she will see no one. You would do well to send to her."

"Do you think so, Mrs. Flower?" asked Sir Robert, his voice trembling and weak.

"Oh, oh—dear, dear, how can I tell? Cruel, bad man; I wish he was dead, and Mr. Flower thinks that so wrong of me. You see, 'tis all true."

"What is true, mamma? You have said that to me a dozen times, and yet I cannot discover what you mean."

"Don't be vexed, dear Beatrice; do not be angry. Prissy knows it, I think. I can't be sure. It's what Julian said."

Being as anxious to know as Beatrice, Sir Robert half guessed the truth, and afterwards the whole was made clear in a conversation with Prissy.

"All she said was, Sir Robert, when she had read the letter to Mrs. Hearn, 'Then Count Julian was right; he meditated this step.' And since then she has never said another word. I have not seen her, indeed she won't let me, nor will she see you,

I know, and she'll die. I know she will; and I will go before any judge and swear she is murdered; and the only pleasure I ever shall have again is in seeing Mr. Asheton hanged for the murder; there now."

Prissy's indignation and disgust grew with the hours.

Sir Robert walked up to Asheton Court. He saw his son, from whom he could gain little information. He was scared and bewildered, but appeared to regard his father with rather more interest than usual. The mention of his Aunt Marion made him cry.

"Is she so ill, Edward?" demanded his father.

"Oh, papa, papa, her face is like my mamma's before she was taken away from me. If she becomes dead, if she goes away to heaven, oh! what shall I do?—who will love me any more?"

"Go up to her, Edward, and tell her to keep a good heart; all will end well."

During Edward's absence, he went to find Stephenson, Mrs. Asheton's maid, who he heard was yet in the house.

Very sad and piteous was her account.

"To think, sir, that a gentleman so proud and so just should act thus by one of the sweetest ladies living. We feel sure, all we servants, that some underhand work has tampered with his own right judgment and good heart. And it shall be through no fault of ours that our young madam is not speedily made happy. We all intend, sir, to come forward; even if we lose our places, we shall speak up for the dear lady."

"You remain here, then."

"Yes, Sir Robert; Pinner has gone. And even if I have no wages, I mean to remain—the young madam ever in my sight—until the return of Mr. Asheton. No one shall say she is not guarded and cared for. Though I have lived for thirty years with the Ashetons, Sir Robert, love them as I may, I respect none more than my young mistress."

"Does Mr. Asheton give any reason for not returning, or hope of eventually doing so?"

"Neither one nor the other, Sir Robert; and that is why I think some evil-disposed person, for a private end, has taken advantage of his whims, (for he has plenty of them) to separate him from his wife. Strongly as he may wish to have his children to himself, unless some other influence worked upon him, I don't think he could have been cruel enough to leave her alone here in this heartless manner."

"I heard the Count di Ramiano said something."

"Well, so he did, sir; he told Dr. Ford before me, Mr. Asheton never meant to return; he was only waiting his mother's death, to make arrangements for never returning to England again; and if he told that to my poor dead mistress, Madam Asheton, no wonder it killed her. But he raved so, I did not think it needful to regard him."

"How could he have obtained such an idea?"

"Goodness knows, Sir Robert; and there was something about a settlement. But he is gone, and I trust is safe in a madhouse. Better feelings will touch Mr. Asheton shortly, and then all will come right. Meantime, Sir Robert, we are all thankful to have Master Fane. He is the only person that can rouse her, for she is stunned with grief. She hears his least word, and attends to every wish, but she takes no notice of us, and would eat nothing, but for him; and he is very good and thoughtful, far beyond what we might expect. We all think that the trouble and care she had with him will be now returned to her. He may be the means, with God's blessing, of preserving her health and reason under this bitter blow."

"I trust so. Can you think of any means by which I could serve her?"

"None at present, Sir Robert; we must let the first shock be softened to her by the power of the Almighty. None else can comfort her. But should I know of anything by and bye, I will be sure to write."

"Do; on you I rely. Remember, there is nothing, no trouble, no labour, no sacrifice, I would not make for her."

(But one, Sir Robert.)

Stephenson having thanked and promised him, he departed to the house of one of his numerous friends, there to drown his remorse (if he had any) in the excitements he loved so well, and to indulge which he had perilled so much.

Very shadowy and changed was Marion when she issued forth from the secluded chamber of a woful struggle with life and death.

Brought by the faithful servants of an unjust master to the sea-shore, accompanied by the affectionate Edward, in the hope that the healthy breeze would tinge her white cheek with a colour, no matter how faint, they placed her on the rock, that memorable rock on which she had first seen her husband. Not that they knew it, yet were they glad to see some emotion flitting over the hitherto impassive face, and imputed it to the sight of scenes she had loved and valued.

Day by day they brought her to the same spot, and though their hopes of rousing her to further exertions, to stronger health, ended as yet in disappointment, they persisted in the plan as the best they could do for her.

Stephenson and Payne always accompanied her, the coachman waiting with the carriage at some little distance, or slowly driving up and down, until her increasing pallor warned them that she was tired. Tenderly they took her back again. Beatrice had gone down to speak to her the first day she was brought. Jealously as Stephenson would have guarded her from intrusion, she hardly liked to forbid her own family approaching her; but after having given notice that Miss Flower was near, and receiving no reply, there was nothing further to be done.

Beatrice did not come often. Marion's grief was of a kind inexplicable to her; it was too quiescent. She might be revenged, but it was after a sort that left her in a condition less enviable than that of her victim.

A stormy, indignant, retaliating bitterness she had desired to excite, that would feed her wrath with the very mode of expressing it, until reason would be overthrown, and Marion would prove her own destroyer. But this pale, motionless, unresisting victim irritated the fiery temper of Beatrice more than any other state could have done. Meantime, as sure as the carriage appeared on the sands, so surely did one warm, faithful little heart rush down to be seated on the rock in time to welcome her darling May. And there would Prissy sit in pleasant patience, thinking herself supremely happy and overpaid if May showed the ghost of a smile on seeing her. But if she spoke, Prissy's exultation was boundless.



CHAPTER XLVI.

SIR ROBERT HAS A CHANCE GIVEN HIM TO REPENT.

SIR ROBERT FANE had besought Prissy to write to him; but he began to tire of the one incessant theme, and the same sad tale never varying.

"Why do you not rouse her indignation, my dear Priscilla?" wrote he in answer. "Urge her to go out, visit, and receive

visitors. I'll stake any sum you like to name, that she will soon become the most popular person in the county. Everyone will take up her cause, and Asheton will hear of it, and of the position she holds in the neighbourhood, and be thoroughly ashamed of having doubted her."

Prissy's answer was characteristic, and warned Sir Robert he had let out more than he intended.

"Doubted her indeed! What is all that about, I should like to know? What is there to doubt concerning May? If there are any doubts going about, I'll write to Mr. Asheton myself. We won't wait for any hearsaying. But I suppose you must have made some mistake. I shall not give May your advice. First, because I don't agree in it; and secondly, because I know she won't follow it. But she is getting a little better at last. Papa wrote such a sermon. Mamma was nearly a fortnight choosing the text. It was out of Job—second chapter, tenth verse—and described all his sufferings and losses. Really, I was like to cry over Job and all he went through, papa preached so pathetically about him. Then mamma asked May what she thought of it; and she answered, 'It was a good sermon.' 'Job was more tried than you, my dear,' says mamma. 'Not so,' answered May; 'his children were safe in heaven, and of what use were his riches without them?'"

"So, you see, she hears and thinks, both good things. But oh, Sir Robert, listen to this" (Prissy always wrote as if she was speaking), "that odd woman, the Lady Superior, comes after her every day; she prays aloud, so that May can hear her; and when May said, in answer to one of her questions, 'I would be comforted' (oh, so sadly she said it, I burst out crying, because I really could not help it), she was so conceited as to say, 'She would comfort her directly, if she followed her directions.' And what a jargon she kept up; I could not make out a word of sense, but that she called May ungrateful and an idolater, merely because she said she loved the south wind because it touched her children's cheeks and lips ere it came to her, and she was grateful to God for the sun; it shone on them and her perhaps at the same time. Such pretty ideas—so like May! But I have no opinion of your hard, stony women, that dress very odd, and have harsh voices. They don't feel, except when they have not a good dinner."

Prissy enjoyed her correspondence with Sir Robert Fane so much, that she omitted no opportunity of writing, which may account for the weariness, not to say wrath, with which he read

them. The one never-wearying detail of Marion's grief and desolate ways was placed before him in every possible phase, so that he began to accuse his innocent correspondent of a great deal more cleverness than even we, her devoted admirers, can credit her with; imagining she was heaping retribution on his erring head.

As if her letters were not sufficient, he received about this time one from Mr. Hearn, asking his advice regarding a very delicate subject, no less than Mrs. Asheton's refusal to use the money appointed by Mr. Asheton for her sole benefit.

"When I took her the draft for the first quarter," wrote he, "she was seated, as usual, in the window of poor Mrs. Asheton's parlour, in her accustomed sad, forlorn manner. Indeed, Sir Robert—excuse the remark—I cannot look at her without tears; such a wife—such a mother—and thus left. Honourable and just as Mr. Asheton has always proved himself to be, nothing will induce me to believe but that some very evil and fatal influence has been about him, of which we know nothing. We all look to you, sir, as the one to right her. You have but to prove to Mr. Asheton the injustice of leaving her thus young and bereft, and he will not think his lifetime sufficient to make it up. But if you will be good enough to come down to Asheton Court, I can talk that over with you and Mr. Flower, whose supineness is very reprehensible. At present, I must return to my first remark. I took Mrs. Asheton the draft; she looked at it, asked me the meaning of it, and upon hearing it, tore it in halves, without other words than:—'Return Mr. Asheton his money; I have sufficient of my own for my wants.' Now, sir, I know not what to do. You remember Mr. Asheton allows no infringement of his rules. I fear to do mischief by sending the message, and making what is bad still worse between them. I have made inquiries, and I find that Mrs. Asheton lives in that splendid house more simply and rigorously than an anchorite, paying the housekeeper scrupulously for everything she uses. I believe her own money is under three hundred a year; and as she keeps her pony to ride with Master Fane, and abates none of her charities, she has nothing left for luxuries. She accepts the kindly offices of the servants (who adore her) quite in the same spirit with which they are offered, for she has a noble heart, which is ever ready to judge nobly. I beg you will come down and use your influence with her, or advise me, &c., &c."

Sir Robert's nerves would not permit him to go and see the devastation he had caused.

So he wrote a very eloquent letter instead, with not only various good and cogent reasons for her taking this money, but a few maxims of worldly advice, such as "she had a right to double as much, and it would be a good plan to show Asheton what a star she was in the world. For with two thousand a year for her own use, and no house to keep up, she could command any station in society, &c., &c." In fact, he quite warmed into enthusiasm about her, and settled that the duchess should present her, the countess should be a mother to her, and all the world would and must rave about her. Great, therefore, was his disappointment when he received the answer:—

"DEAR SIR ROBERT,—I have the misfortune to bear Mr. Asheton's name. That is sufficient misery, without the insult of being pensioned by him. As the mother of his children, I live in their and my home.

"Your true sister,

"MARION ASHETON."

But the disappointment gave way to an enthusiastic admiration of her decision.

"The very queen of trumps is she. Now, though I am a very indifferent fellow as regards women, not being able to appreciate their little sensibilities and whimsicalities, yet she's a splendid creature. One might reckon oneself on the right road to all that's good if she had one in harness. And very willing to go too, no one would jib with her. If I had had the luck now—but hold, you consummate blockhead, if you had been the only man left in the world, she would not have looked at you. I don't, in fact, regard her as a woman. From the very first moment when she startled me so by her fair appearance, I have never thought of her as belonging to the same nature as we have. I suppose I must go down and settle about this money. I am very loathe; and where is the good? We none of us know where Asheton has hid himself. We can't advise him of her determination. I wish to heaven I had four thousand a year for life; I would find Asheton before a week was out. The very queen of trumps—am I the knave?"

It will be seen by this colloquy Sir Robert Fane's conscience was extremely troublesome. Meantime, after hesitating for some weeks, he did at last obey Mr. Hearn's request.

He went first to Mr. Hearn, then to Mr. Flower, exchanged a couple of dark looks with his coadjutor, Miss Flower, and while wondering of what materials Mr. Flower was really composed, so placid and well content was he with himself and all the world, spite of Mr. Hearn's eloquent appeal regarding the fading health and forlorn condition of his niece, he went down to see Marion seated on her rock.

Beatrice watched him. In less than ten minutes she saw him rapidly turn back again, and the next she heard of him was that he was gone altogether. She smiled her bitter smile. He had fled, unable to witness the work of his own hands. He had fled, no doubt horrified—but he was safe to tell no tales. If he had really repented, he would have remained to gain strength to do it from the sight of his victim. But he fled, and all was safe. Yet Marion was regaining strength and colour. But with them came a strange perception of her wrongs. Composed as her nature was of feelings essentially gentle and soft, the desolation of her state was the harder to bear. She had no fears for her children. To keep them, to consider them wholly his own, Mr. Asheton had sacrificed her. They were not likely to be unhappy, or to be harshly treated. Their danger lay more in the other extreme. She had therefore only to feel for herself, and as the future rolled itself out to her mental vision, hard and unnatural grew the thoughts of her heart. Cold, supine, no kind thought emanated from her, no consolation touched her, no mark of tenderness moved her. She did her duty by Edward scrupulously, and was always affectionate to him. She returned Prissy's kisses, and sometimes spoke to her. But upon all the rest of the world she gazed with vacant lacklustre eyes, too woful to have even the pang of anguish in them.

No wonder Sir Robert fled. The remembrance of that sad face might have haunted him to some good;—but his services were suddenly required elsewhere.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MR. ASHETON BUYS SOME EXPERIENCE AT AN EXORBITANT AND RATHER BITTER PRICE.

MARION was not the only sufferer. As if touched in one night by the sudden infliction of a ten years' struggle with life, Godfrey Asheton wandered upon a far distant shore, quite as unhappy, and almost as lonely as Marion.

On the first spur of an extraordinary, inevitable decision, he had speeded away from his own kith and kin, with no other thought than to rid himself of their presence. He had neither time to waste in grief, nor leisure to examine his present feelings, by the test of reason and common sense. His children were his second object; after this one imperative necessity was accomplished, making direct for the coast, he hired a small steamer, by means of which he cruised up and down the shores of the Mediterranean, looking out for a secluded but beautiful spot where he could hide himself and his children, at least for sufficient time to enable his reason and health to recover; both of which he felt to be deeply shaken.

Touched by the honest nature and simple good sense of the consul at Carrara, whose kindly words, just sufficient and no more, were the first English words that had greeted his ears since his flight, the desolate Godfrey Asheton clung to the man as to a friend. He lingered there until this feeling became so strong, he took him somewhat into his counsels; and confessing his desire to lead a quiet, uninterrupted life, wholly occupied by the education and care of his children, and as far apart as possible from intercourse with the rest of the world, besought his assistance to find him an abode.

This the consul gladly consented to do, as much because it was a great boon to him to have an English family near, as because the liking between him and Mr. Asheton was mutual; especially also did he, a determined old bachelor, delight in and love Mr. Asheton's beautiful children. Dismissing their floating home, and settling in a sort of villa that had belonged to some rich and noble follower of the art of sculpture, and bore about

it all the marks of their near vicinity to the famed quarries of the finest marble in the world, Mr. Asheton wrote for a tutor and governess, already known to, and employed before by him, to complete his party.

This villa had a singular situation. Flat around it, and close to the sea, there rose up, on all sides, grey mountains, of a colour almost ethereal. It was no stretch of the imagination to suppose that within their vast bosoms, they contained nothing but pure white marble, whose spotless brilliancy shone through the light covering of nature. Blending with this grey tint were great groups of olive trees, diversified by clusters of little villages, placed upon every little pinnacle or hill, far and near.

The villa itself was by no means convenient or picturesque. But it had a recommendation in Mr. Asheton's eyes that redeemed it from all faults. It was embosomed in olive, orange, and vine trees, and in defiance of English neatness, appeared deserted and empty. Thus, should any visitor from England chance to find themselves at Carrara, actuated by curiosity, there was nothing about the house that would tempt them to ask, "Who lives there?"

Freed from the one fear of encountering any of his belongings, Mr. Asheton set himself diligently to work, to arrange his house and his children's studies. He did not think he could be traced, for, independent of the fact that the owners of the steamvessel had not succeeded in comprehending his name, they had not been able to navigate the vessel further than Spezzia, and even then, had to go out to sea for safety, when the wind blew towards shore. So they knew nothing but that their further services were not required.

Mr. Asheton had been meditating a separation from his sister for some time. The old adage, that "Poverty makes one acquainted with strange bed-fellows," might be enlarged with much truth into "travelling developes strange humours." Mrs. Trevor travelling, was very different to Mrs. Trevor at home, and her brother's eyes were being opened to the fact that his favourite sister, the clever, talented Ellinor, was a querulous and somewhat ignorant woman, who talked a great deal more than she thought. He might not perhaps have arrived at this conclusion so soon, but for his children. The strict truth, whether pleasing or not, they spoke, without reference to any one. Consequently many unpleasant scenes occurred between them and their aunt and cousins, which did not at all redound to the credit of any party. The Asheton children were impertinent

and rude; Mrs. Trevor violent and irrational; the Miss Trevors feeble and deceitful.

Moreover, it began to grate with an unpleasant sharpness upon Godfrey Asheton's nerves, the constant obloquy thrown upon the name of Flower, which, whenever the children did wrong (and that was as certain as that they entered their aunt's presence), was invariably the salve poured over the wounds they inflicted on Mrs. Trevor's feelings. She forgot that there is blistering salve as well as soothing, and perceived not the irritating sore she was daily opening in her brother's heart.

Mr. Trevor, too, proved, upon constant intercourse, to be utterly deficient in every quality calculated to make an intelligent companion. Setting aside the natural indignation Godfrey could not but feel at the subtleties to which he resorted to deceive his wife and aid his daughters, he longed to be rid of his presence.

Like mouldering damp, Mr. Trevor appeared to Godfrey to infect every place into which he entered with deceit and blundering stupidity. He never gave a straightforward answer; he was slow, yet not sure; he was always making great efforts, and never known to be ready;—deprecatory, fawning, cringing—the most inefficient, helpless, meagre specimen of a man that could well be conceived. That refined and intelligent intercourse promised by Mrs. Trevor to her brother, was never so far from his grasp as at the period when she had him entirely to herself. Every day brought its paltry grievances, which, insignificant in themselves, were yet sufficient to mar the enjoyment of the present hour. Every day Godfrey hoped that the vexations of the previous one would leave intact the present one, and each day he was the sport of his hopes. Mrs. Trevor was incapable by nature of enjoying the life of which she had painted such vivid pictures. Her mind was small, and given to petty trifles—mounted on the stilts of imagination, she tottered and fell over, glad to find herself on the safe ground of the commonest earth.

Thus, when left to the society of Mr. and Mrs. Trevor's essence of refinement, as it was supposed to be, his sister would have been utterly chagrined had she seen into his heart. He not only regretted the society he had despised at Asheton Court, but recalled the many traits of his forsaken Marion's love and intelligence, with an earnestness that portrayed how she gained in the contrast.

In fact, but one thing had prevented his return home six months before. And that was the children themselves.

They bore no resemblance now to the healthy, rosy, lively children he had brought from England eighteen months before.

The variety of teachers by whom they had been surrounded, the many changes in their attendants, Mr. Asheton's own personal ignorance of the habits and training of children, together with Mrs. Trevor's perversion of them, were all entirely detrimental to their health and manners. It is true, they knew a vast number of things that were surprising for their age. They could deliver a message in four different languages; they could pass very fluent opinions upon sculpture, painting, and literature, somewhat after the fashion of parrots; yet they were ignorant of the most common every-day knowledge. The fruits of the ground, the names of trees, the signs of the heavens, the order of time, the simplest geography, all these being considered unworthy the notice of young Ashetons, they were left to pick up anyhow. But this ignorance was not so detrimental to them as the custom Mr. Asheton had adopted of their being his companions. Prematurely brought forward, keeping the same hours that he did, attending the same meals, in his hurry to render them the companions he longed for, he forgot they were yet children. Pedantic, conceited, overfed, overdressed little men and women, nothing but their innate, frank, and original characteristics saved them from being extremely disagreeable. And when their father acknowledged to himself there must be some radical fault in his management, he was wholly at a loss to conjecture from what it proceeded. That they had no control over their wayward tempers surprised him, though he was sufficiently just not to impute it to the taint of the Flower blood, as his sister did. He had not yet learned from experience that anyone with Asheton blood in his veins could be passionate, imperious, pettish—the three prevailing tempers of his three children. Therefore they reigned in high force over the little unfortunates, who, privileged from birth, were not supposed to need a guiding hand, a gentle rule, and a firm coercion.

Italian attendants were about the worst they could have. Companions, such as their cousins, the Trevors, fostered all the besetting sins of the young Ashetons, they despised them so much; while the aggravating manners of their aunt were still worse.

In fact, three more troublesome, contumacious children seldom fall to the lot of one parent's guidance, and Mr. Asheton secretly

longed for an opportunity to restore them to their mother, though he had not as yet allowed this even to himself. He was worried that they looked so pale; he was annoyed that they were so naughty; he was shocked that they used such language, which was none the less pungent because it was foreign; and he felt powerless even to understand to what it was all owing.

There was nothing that he had neglected. Had he not forsworn his home, left his mother, deserted his wife, been made miserable abroad? Was he not, the fastidious Godfrey Asheton, almost a nurse—troubled with washing-bills, administrator of physic, wardrobe-keeper in ordinary—and all this for three children, who, so far from rewarding him, grew more troublesome, more disappointing every day?

These were Mr. Asheton's feelings while he lived with his sister Ellinor; and it was neither unjust nor unkind in him to impute a great deal of this annoyance to her.

He longed for Marion to write and beseech him to come home, he could endure the separation no longer. He even began to feel hurt and accuse her of heartlessness. And as he did so, his evil genius might have whispered it "was strange, passing strange," she did not. Hence arose that one fatal confidence to Sir Robert, the little small speck that alone tarnished the bright shield of a noble nature—above suspicion—incapable of mistrust.

Now it was accomplished. The separation from his sister was completed—his arrangements regarding his children were all good, and already bearing fruit. In the midst of a weight of woe that he was at first incapable of realising, he had this one drop of comfort—the children were already benefiting by the separation from their aunt; their hours were more consonant with their age, the sea breezes had given them a little colour, and partly unconscious of it themselves, the trouble expressed in their father's countenance softened their wayward moods: they forgot their own grievances in awe of his.

For day by day, hour by hour, grew upon him the full measure of his anguish.

His mother—the mother from whom he had scarcely ever been separated until the last two years of his life—the mother so identified with everything that was happiest and best in that life—was gone, nevermore to return; and her death strange and sudden. However much he felt that he had not been there to hear her last words, soothe her dying pillow, all was lost sight of in the agony that she was slain—by what? A slander!

Was it a slander? She had not died else. Herself the most honoured of Asheton matrons—not a word—a breath—a slur was ever known to be upon that name she bore so fondly, loved so well; and rightly, as became her, she died as it was whispered.

Thus did Mr. Asheton feed his misery and increase his suspicions. It was enough that his mother had heard and died. It was more than sufficient. His brother-in-law, cognisant of everything, had not, though a man of the world, of more easy virtue than any Asheton, been able to proffer one word in extenuation. He had desired to have his children all to himself—their sole parent. Was it to punish him for the error which he was just so painfully discovering, that God had inflicted upon him the heaviest of all human ills? And the saddest, weariest, most degrading thing of all was, that far up upon those ethereal mountains, higher still in the clear, calm night sky, with all its throbbing stars, down again within the park trees, floating up for ever from the very depths of the clear sea, came the gentle, loving face of Marion. And he felt that he had never loved her so well as now, when she was lost to him for ever.



CHAPTER XLVIII.

RUMOUR AGAIN BUSIES HERSELF ABOUT MRS. ASHETON'S AFFAIRS.

AGAIN rumour rioted unrestrained on the state of affairs at Asheton Court, and again Nos. 1 and 2, the banker's wife and the rector's female curate, had the privilege of spreading, or rather creating, the basis of the reports—the mysterious hints of the Lady Superior (or Miss Walker, as Prissy contended she ought to be called, that having been her father's name), which were all the more pungent from their ill-nature (superior as she was, she was yet amenable to the vexation of a disappointment irritating her temper). Joined to her remarks were others still less truthful, yet even more powerful, uttered by Beatrice. Coming from one of her own relations, who had the right to question the authority? But above all, was the ocular demonstration of the poor mourner, daily seated on the sands, listless, forlorn, un-

heeding—the servants so respectfully vigilant, Prissy so determinately watchful.

The great Asheton mystery was now explained. Poor Mr. Asheton was very much pitied, at the same time considered to be rightly served. He married in a hurry, without consulting anyone, gladly as everyone would have come forward to advise him. He probably knew nothing about the young lady, consequently he must reap the fruits of neglecting to marry into one of the county families, whose antecedents were well known, patent to all the world.

It was sad to think one so young, so pretty, with so much promise of good in her countenance, should be cursed with insanity. But this direful calamity generally seized upon the young and lovely, those with ever-varying expressions and transparent eyes.

Mr. Asheton was now excused from the sin of deserting his wife; it was necessary for the children's welfare that they should be removed from their mother's society. Old Mrs. Asheton had been left in charge; and while she lived, the secret was well kept. But now it could be concealed no longer; young Mrs. Asheton wandered forth deranged, but harmless.

These opinions being decided, the fact of insanity established, all interest vanished in the disclosure. The county had other and more important affairs to discuss, and once more Ashetons and their concerns became a dead letter.

"We have had a great many visitors lately at the Court," wrote Prissy to Sir Robert Fane, "but May did not see anyone; excepting one, and that was the duchess. I don't mind entertaining common people, and receiving them for May, but I am not used to duchesses, so I just said to her, 'Would you like to see my cousin?' and she seemed quite delighted; and so we took May by surprise, though, of course, nothing surprises her now.

"And the duchess stayed quite an hour, and was very pleasant; indeed she almost cried once, which, you know, being a duchess, I did not think she would have done, except that I suppose they feel just as much as we do.

"She was telling May how well she remembered her first appearance, having heard before a very strange report about her, and how she took a fancy to her then, and had remembered her ever since. And she must pardon her for lamenting over the change, or something of that sort.

"'You have no mother, I think,' she said, so kindly. 'I should like to be your mother, if I might.'

"Then May looked up pleased, but she only took hold of her hand.

"'You have some sorrow, my love,' said the duchess.

"'Yes; but it cannot be mended.'

"'God does not permit us such hopeless feelings.'

"'Mine are hopeless. I know of nothing that can remove them.'

"Then it was the tears came into the duchess's eyes, and she said:—

"'Have you none to care for, or love you?'"

Here we shall have to leave Prissy's letter, and record a strange and rather bewildering exclamation that burst from her at this interesting stage of the conversation between Marion and her visitor.

"My goodness, gracious me! what a goose I have been all this time. To think of me never remembering such a thing."

But as Marion did not heed it, the duchess took no notice. But it must not be passed unregarded by the reader, because it led to consequences.

No sooner was Prissy released from her duties at Asheton Court, than she ran to the Wood-head, puffing and panting like a dilapidated or deeply-injured pair of bellows,—down she sat, flushed and ardent, to write a letter. Fast and furious went the pen, dashed and scored was every other word, sealed and blotched was the letter, vehement and strong were Prissy's injunctions regarding its speedy and safe delivery by the postman.

Then, as he went out of sight, important bearer of this most important despatch, swinging his arm (for he had but one), as if arms were only used to swing, and he felt no inconvenience from not having as many as other people, he became invested in Prissy's eyes with a strange fascination. As his form appeared and disappeared through the trees, Prissy's face altered from alternate indignation at his slowness to high satisfaction at his reappearance.

Conjectures as to a probable fall, entailing the breaking of a leg, were satisfactorily answered by his jumping into sight with great agility; and until a turn of the road shut him fairly out of view, Prissy's interest in him grew with every step. Failing further conjectures regarding him, she fell to various mysterious remarks anent her letter.

"I have written a letter, and I have sent a letter; I wonder if I shall have an answer to that letter."

At the Wood-head everybody was so busy about his own affairs, no one heeded other people's. So Prissy hinted on obscurely and enigmatically, unregarded, until time altered the phase of her speech.

"I have written a letter, and I have sent a letter, and I have never had an answer yet."

Eight days passed. From the first state of excitement, Prissy had passed into a lofty mood, then into one of perplexity. Finally, she became low and desponding. The postman, with only one arm, was an object neither of interest nor pity; he was simply a tiresome man, always coming when Prissy was in the middle of a frill.

On the ninth day, she could no longer say:—

"I have never had an answer."

There lay a letter in an unknown handwriting; clearly "the answer."



CHAPTER XLIX.

PRISSY PREPARES FOR COMPANY.

It is recorded that Prissy was too dumbfounded at first to open her letter. She looked upon it as a ghost. Gradually her nerves strengthened; she broke the seal; the stocking that she was knitting fell unheeded on the floor, and the kitten took immediate possession of it, as if it was a plaything meant for her. And Prissy never regarded the mischief the kitten did that day, any more than if she had indeed intended her stocking to have no better fate.

Not having ever seen Prissy's letter, we cannot give it; but the answer is before us. This is the copy, with Prissy's commentaries as she read:—

"MY DEAR COUSIN,—(Well, I am glad of that, at any rate, because I am her cousin, whether or no). I thank you very much for your kind and feeling letter (so I suppose she does

love May). On the evening of the same day you receive this we shall be at the Wood-head (law!), and I shall leave it to you to prepare my darling Marion (goodness), or not, as you think best. (Now, that's what I call—just that, you know). When I see you, dear Prissy, I will make you ask forgiveness for doubting my love and interest. Whatever you might have thought, it is evermore yours, in gratitude for telling me of May's state. We shall bring but one servant—a man.

“Your affectionate cousin,

“KYTHE GORDON.”

“So that is an answer, and a very proper one.

“I forget what sort of letter I wrote,—‘kind and feeling.’” (Prissy thinks it was a model of a letter to this day, though it was written in a lofty, disdainful style, as we know, good reader.) “Mamma, I have got a letter: it is from my cousin, Lady Gordon. She is to be here this evening, with Sir Alan Gordon, her husband, and one servant—a man.”

Prissy's announcement was electrical. Good Mrs. Flower cried with joy. Mr. Flower spoke. He absolutely said, “I am glad of it.” Beatrice shuddered and trembled. Lady Gordon had ever held a species of awe over her. Prissy alone held high ground.

“We must prepare the best room.”

“To be sure, to be sure, my dear,” answered Mrs. Flower. “Take my best *barège* out of the wardrobe, Prissy, and you'll find two or three of my caps somewhere. And I put the cat there, with her kittens, in the clothes' basket, because she eats them if she is looked at or disturbed. And your father's surplice is pinned within the curtains, to keep it from the dust. And, oh! Prissy, Prissy, I think the last lot of preserves is put there, until I can brandy and tie them down. What ought we to have for dinner? Scotch dishes? Well, how delightful. She is a beautiful woman, I hear, and he a very fine man. Constant, what sermon have you got ready?”

But as Mrs. Flower never ceased speaking, we will refrain recording further.

After all was prepared, and the bustle of preparation was over, Prissy had time to think. It had been settled Marion was not to be told. The surprise, it was hoped, would be beneficial to her, rather than the contrary.

“Goodness, gracious me, I wonder what she is like! If she is a great lady, she will not like any of us but Beatrice, and

she will not do May good, and I shall be blamed. I begin to wish I had never written that letter. She may turn out very disagreeable, and most likely too, never having come to see May all these years; or her husband may be still more disagreeable. However, it's no use worrying. I do declare I think that's the carriage. Oh, law! now I wish I was a hundred miles away. I'll never write any more letters, I am certain."

Ere five minutes had elapsed, Prissy had recanted that last resolve a thousand times over.

A beautiful and stately likeness of the lovely Marion was looking at Prissy with affectionate eyes, and kissing her with grateful kisses. Only the dear May had not so regal a presence, such soft dark eyes, the shining dark hair, smoothed as with an unerring painter's hand, across the broad, intellectual forehead; a voice of such low soft melody. Beatrice looked faded and small beside her—the remembrance of Marion brought only girlish prettiness to mind. Like the presence of some beautiful and grand exotic among the wild flowers of the hedges, sat Kythe, Lady Gordon, in the midst of them.

"Goodness me, she is my cousin, and not once removed. I don't know what to liken her to. Perhaps an angel; but I never saw one. Archangels are men, I believe, and not women. A queen is much too common; an empress would be better. And yet that won't do; because she is more kind than grand, and, oh, how she loves Sir Alan! And how handsome he is, though so melancholy; and what a cough he has—how it startled me! I thought it came out of the cellar. And she is not fine; she never brought a maid; and has unpacked and put away everything. But what an odd servant; as for understanding his foreign language, it's no use trying; I had no idea Scotch people had a different language to us. What a hideous man he is. But I suppose he is a good servant, for my cousin Kythe (she told me to call her Kythe, or I never could have done it) seemed to regard him so much, and was so anxious about him, the great monster; he might have a dozen colds, before I would trouble my head about him. Oh, my stars, don't I wish those Ashetons could have seen my cousin, Lady Gordon—but I must to bed; I and my cousin are to be off to the Court before breakfast to-morrow."

The above are faint shadowings of Prissy's thoughts that evening, after she had retired to her room.

May was sitting in the summer parlour, waiting for Edward; their breakfast, consisting of two wooden bowls of milk, richly

covered with cream, a loaf of brown bread, water-cresses and salt, was placed ready upon a small table in one window, while she looked out of the other into the flower-garden. She was too listless even to turn her head as the door opened, though she said:—

“You are punctual, dear boy—a good mark to-day.”

“Oh, indeed!” answered Prissy, blunderingly nervous as to what had best be done.

Marion turned and saw them—one look was sufficient.

“Oh, sister, sister, love your poor forsaken Marion!”

And the long pent-up grief burst forth as she precipitated herself into her sister’s arms.

Satisfied that she had done a good deed, and convinced that the new cousin required no assistance to subdue all violent emotion, Prissy pounced upon Edward’s bowl of milk, which, with the brown loaf, she bore off, discreetly closing all communication between the world and the long separated sisters.

“Now, Edward, you need not go downstairs, but take your breakfast here—and then you shall say your lessons to me.”

“Aunt May is not ill?”

“No.”

“Or unhappy?”

“No, indeed; her sister is come.”

“You may hear me my lessons, if you like, Prissy, but all the sisters in the world won’t prevent Aunt May hearing them too.”

“Oh, you conceited boy, why she has not seen this sister, her only sister, for eight or ten years.”

“Still, she will hear my lessons; but what is this sister like?”

“Oh, so beautiful, such a magnificent woman; I am half afraid of her, and I know Beatrice is too, which is extraordinary.”

“Then I shall not care for her. I don’t like big women.”

“You very saucy boy!”

“Now, Prissy, have you never seen that the little bantam cocks and hens in the farmyard are always the quickest, the most spirited and lively, while those great, overgrown Dorking hens think of nothing but grubbing and laying eggs. Great things are generally stupid, so I shall not admire your grand beauty.”

“You are much too young to know anything about beauty.”

“And pray what more do you know of it?”

“I am a very good judge, though I am not a beauty myself,

but I wish I was; I should like to be admired and praised very much. What a nice thing it would be!"

Edward, being at that age when boys are prone to blurt out the exact truth, and a little more, the reverse of complimentary, had no answer to give to Prissy's confidences. Moreover, he was thinking of his own private grievances. Never before had anyone presumed to engross his Aunt May at this unwonted hour in the morning, and he began to suffer from jealousy.

He finished his breakfast in silence, and was about to obey Prissy's behest, and repeat his lessons to her, when he heard a well-known voice calling him.

With a shout of delight hurled at Prissy's head, which made her shudder, he rushed downstairs. He was right, he did say his lessons to his Aunt May, though not then, and he accepted a kiss from Lady Gordon with extreme graciousness, ere he went for his ride.



CHAPTER L.

TWO SISTERS COMPARE SORROWS.

SIR ALAN and Lady Gordon would remain neither at the Wood-head nor at Asheton Court. They took a small house to themselves on the beach.

For a time, Marion revived under the influence of her sister's presence.

"So should I, if I was dying," remarked Prissy to anyone who might be within hearing.

Very gentle were both her sister and brother to Marion, but she drooped again.

The sisters sat together on that favourite seat. Sir Alan was riding with Edward.

"Are your sorrows never to end? Have you no hope, my May?"

"None, my sister;—all my life long, I shall have to bear this solitary existence, which is yet peopled with memories and thoughts that make it even more desolate. Then my children will grow up into men and women—they will begin their battle

of life, and there will be no mother's heart to watch over their first griefs, to guide them to their first joys. Think, sister, my children might pass me, and not recognise their mother."

"I hear so high a character of Mr. Asheton, Marion, for honour and justness, for everything but this one mistaken whim regarding his children. Rely upon it, love, he will return, he will restore them."

"No, he loves them, but not their mother. He wished for heirs, for children to perpetuate the name he loves so well. He has them. Henceforward, their mother is nothing to him or them."

"This is too monstrous for me to believe, my May. Some evil influence has been at work. The very love he has for the children must increase his love for their mother."

"He loves them too much, too well—and all the more because they are Ashetons. There has been no other evil influence at work than that single one of family pride. I had a fear, a strange interest, when I perceived the magnitude of this besetting sin. But I guessed not that it would outrage the holiest feelings, leaving half my heart dead, because the love of him emptied it, and the other half wounded, crushed, crying for those to whom I gave life. Oh, my sister, it is impossible; I cannot live, and bear so much woe. I would to God I were dead."

Laying her head on her sister's lap in utter abandonment of woe, she scarcely felt the caressing fingers of Kytke smoothing her disordered hair, or knew that her hot tears fell as fast as her own.

"My Alan intends, dearest, to write to Mr. Asheton, as your nearest male relative—"

"Not for worlds—it must not be. I sorrow only on my own account. I know my children are well cared for. I can be, I am, to the full as proud as he. Some day, I may be revenged, but I will not enforce it. No, no, Kytke, sister, dearest, promise that no appeal is made to Mr. Asheton on my behalf. I do not doubt his love and care for the children. He must not have the power to say—I could not live without him. I am a mother, and have no children—it is for that I mourn."

"Some mothers are more to be pitied than you, Marion—they have wicked children."

"But perhaps their children live with them, and as they sin, so can their loving hearts try means to correct them—or pray to God for them—ever and ever more as they require it."

"Some mothers have unsightly, deformed, or ailing children."

"Ah! sister, then are they happy; no one would wish to take them from their mother."

"Dearest Marion, what a loving heart you have. Let me try some other plea. Let me tell you of misfortunes still greater than yours."

"Surely there can be none such. Am I not wounded by the hand I most loved? Am I not deprived of those whom I loved the more because they were his, by the deliberate decision of a heart that ought to have been more mine than theirs."

"Still I think I know of a fate harder to bear."

"I'll not believe it. Nevertheless tell me of this paragon of woes—this phenomenon of grief. Let me mate her sorrows with mine. You shall be judge between us, sister."

"I cannot be judge, Marion, for I am she."

Marion rose, and confronted her sister. Over her face flitted alternately astonishment, remorse, and that speechless pitying love that tells so much, so silently.

"Nay, dearest May, upbraid not yourself, as I see you are about to do. It is through no fault of yours that you have not long since been my sweetest comforter. I have need of one now, Marion, even as you have. Will you accept the office?"

"Pardon me, oh, pardon me, my sister, that, in my own selfish woes, I forgot yours of such long standing. Speak, I listen; as I listen, I make your griefs my own."

"Thanks, love. God is very good to us in granting a time for mutual health and comfort between two sisters whose lives have been so separated. You could not have assisted me before, May, and had you been engrossed with many ties, you could not have done so now."

"Then I thank God, yes, I thank God. Once more I look upon life as a boon, I have work to do; God help me to comfort you."

Kythe might well be pardoned if she thought she had never seen anything half so lovely as her sister's countenance when she uttered these words. Glowing with renewed hope and love, the earnestness with which she spoke justified the elder sister's involuntary exclamation:—

"Oh, Marion, what a heart you have!"

Marion unheeded these words, she was wrapt up in some fervent prayer, some urgent petition to the Almighty. As if an immediate answer were vouchsafed to her. with unclouded eyes,

with a serene composure, very different from that of the listless, pining murmurer so lately bewailing over God's chastisements, Marion knelt before her sister, and kissing her hands, said:—

“Speak, I am yours—yours only, while you require me.”

And something of the fervour that flushed Marion's countenance, imparted a glow to her sister's, as she silently, but none the less expressively, returned her kisses.

“Our parents regard us,” whispered Marion, as she perceived her sister struggling for composure.

“I feel that it may be so,” whispered Kythe, whose colour came and went, and whose form had sunk back in the attitude of woe more common to Marion. But as her quick ear caught the sound of the coming horses' feet, she assumed at once her usual air of calm composure, and rose with alacrity to welcome her husband and Edward as they cantered up.

“When do you return home, Kythe?” he asked. “Have we time to go round those rocks? Edward says there are curious caverns there.”

“Yes,” answered Marion, hurriedly; “and I will take my sister up there to what we call the rock seat; from thence we can look down upon you. Do not hurry,” she added, as they bid them farewell.

“Where is Kirke?” asked Kythe, when they were out of hearing.

“I think he is there, sister—on the cliff.”

“I must tell him, I must speak to him, and then, Marion, then you shall hear all.”

“Sister, may I tell you how strange I think it that you have only that uncouth servant, and that you appear to want him every moment?”

A pallid look and strange fear passed over Kythe's face as Marion made this remark, and she hurriedly glanced round, as she said, “Hush.”

Marion said no more, though she wondered still further; more especially as the appearance of the old servant, as he came to meet his lady, appeared even more singular than usual. Gaunt and tall, his huge limbs hung loose and awkwardly from their supports, as if they had never been intended for the frame to which they were attached. He might be about sixty years old, and his high cheek-bones and prominent nose were tinged by the sun and weather into a permanent brick colour. His eyes were small, keen, and blue in colour, as bright as those of youth; his hair had been red; and as he shambled towards

them with great splay feet, Marion thought she had never beheld so unprepossessing a figure.

"What's gotten him the noo, my leddy?" was his greeting to Lady Gordon.

"You said, May, we could see them from the cliffs," asked Kythe. "They are gone to see some caverns round the Point, Kirke."

"Aiblins, I'll see them caverns mysel', my leddy; it's joost best."

"If you think so, Kirke, then go, and keep them out as long as you can. I have much to say to my sister."

"Ay, ay, it's time ye telled her a'; she'll maybe's have dune fretten, when she hears of warsen woes."

And ere Marion could express her astonishment, and perhaps indignation, he had shambled away, at vast speed, and her sister was already urging her to hasten to the rock seat.



CHAPTER LI.

THE HISTORY OF KYTHE.

"Do you like Alan, my husband?" asked Kythe, after they were seated.

"I have thought only of you and my grief, since you came, sister. I think, as a girl, I was afraid of him; but he is very kind and gentle to me now."

"Marion, Alan is possessed of every virtue with which God can bless the human heart; linked to as few of the vices that belong to our weak frames as you can imagine. Yet have I cried in my agony, 'Would to God I had never seen him!' But I must not anticipate. It is necessary that I go back. You will not tire, love, if I tell you somewhat of my earliest years."

Marion's only answer was to fling herself, with childish impetuosity, on the sward before her sister, and crossing her arms on that sister's knee, she supported her face upon them, looking up with as much eagerness as love.

"My first grief was the separation from our sweet mother; and though I had a most loving home with our grandmother Aubrey, from whom, May, you get your blue eyes and fair hair,

nothing ever effaced the remembrance of the first one. The hope of returning to it spurred me on to every duty, every exertion. I feared to lose the blessing of God, and be debarred this happiness, as a fit punishment. Therefore, even as a mere girl, I early learnt self-control, and as if chastisement for my first principle not having a higher origin, I never saw again the parents for whom I pined; yet, Marion, this early discipline prepared me for my present life.

"You may have heard that from my godmother, Kythe Gordon, I acquired a separate fortune from the rest of the family, consisting of £1,500 a-year. She was our grandmother's greatest friend. Among other of my girlish wishes, was the desire to restore this fortune to the proper heirs. I liked not being enriched to the detriment of more rightful parties, and to me there was something displeasing in being moved above the care and charge of my parents. It seemed to sever some sacred ties between us. But I could do nothing until I had consulted them, and had reached the proper age. The happy period fixed for my return to you all arrived. I was seventeen years old. I was only waiting a safe escort, when, as I dare say you have heard, our grandmother fell into that long illness, for which our parents were coming home, when honour permitted our father and grandfather to sell out.

"My May will believe, she will judge me by her own affectionate heart, that she who had been mother, father, all to me, was not to be left, when she most required care, to the attendance of servants only. I wrote to ask permission to stay with our grandmother, though indeed, May, it was with the heaviest heart I did it, and was rewarded by the blessing and thanks of my parents for my decision.

"Our grandmother was completely bedridden, and the long evenings were spent by me almost in solitude. One evening, after I had left her for the night (she would never permit me to sleep in her room), it might be about eight o'clock, I felt very desolate and low, and my thoughts wandered to India, mourning over the fate that separated me so far from those I loved as you loved, May. I had heard no sound of bells or doors shutting, when before me I saw, endeavouring to address me, a young gentleman whose appearance gave me an instant and sudden throb of pleasure.

"You see my Alan now, May; you can also remember how much time has changed him since you first saw him, nine years ago."

"Yes, I did not, I should not have known him."

"Then you will not think me passing all bounds of the most immoderate affection when I tell you it is impossible to have seen more than once in a lifetime so beautiful a specimen of youthful manhood as my Alan presented at one and twenty, and the melancholy charm of his manner suited peculiarly a nature like mine, whose whole heart was so drawn in opposite directions.

"He was not only very much embarrassed as he addressed me, but he turned red and pale so often, I could not but fear he was ill. I understood from him that he thought I had rejoined my parents in India, and that, in obedience to the wishes of his aunt and my grandmother, Kytte Gordon, he had come to visit Mrs. Aubrey in her loneliness. This made me tell him of my determination to restore her fortune to her rightful heirs, and I hoped he would assist me to find out those who most needed it. He smiled—oh, May, what power there is in a smile—"

"Hush, hush," exclaimed May, shuddering, "I know it."

"My darling," whispered the fond elder sister, caressing her. Then aloud, she continued:—

"I discovered, May, that he alone was left of the whole of his family, and immediately I penetrated the cause of his sadness, and pitied him as quickly; I felt I should like to be his sister and comfort him, and something of this kind I must have expressed, as having been the almost adopted child of his aunt, and thus somewhat entitled to be considered a connexion."

"No," he said, "that could not be; indeed it was his aunt who had warned him against any intercourse with Miss Flower."

"And wherefore?" I asked, hurt and amazed.

"He again smiled, saying:—

"It was for his own sake she had thus warned him, but as accident had introduced us to each other, he should regard his aunt's scruples no longer, but would call again in the morning, at an hour when he could see Mrs. Aubrey."

"It is the privilege of youth, May, to gild their thoughts with all bright and happy things. After this evening, I know not what possessed me, some essence of divine ether ran through my veins, giving a lightness and elasticity to my frame, that was only equalled by the happiness of my heart; I liked to think that I would restore my godmother's fortune to one so thoroughly worthy of it. I wondered if he was rich, and would not care for it; I hoped he was poor, was in love, and could not

marry without more fortune. What happiness to restore his own to him!

"I must not dwell on this time; if I do, how shall I describe the end?—what must be the end? He came very often, always now, when our grandmother was wheeled into the drawing-room. If he chanced to find me alone, he left immediately. May, I knew, I felt he liked me, and this fitting regard for my youth and inexperience made me less careful to scrutinize my life. I liked it only too well. By degrees, at my grandmother's wish, I went out a little into the world, chaperoned by her old friends. I was presented; the name of Flower being then in all people's mouths, our father and grandfather were gaining us a fine, a grand notoriety. You will guess, May, I was more proud to say that I was their child, than any admiration that fell to my own share."

"I remember your letters then, Kythe. I heard my mother say to our father, after reading a letter from England, 'How beautiful our girl must be, Osman, though she says nothing herself of the admiration she excites. Only of her heroes does she write.' I ran to the glass to see also if I was pretty, and I thought that I too would think more of being our brave father's daughter, than of any other gift."

"I met Alan often; long before I looked up and around for him in those crowded companies, I knew he would have seen and recognised me. I began to know he loved me, and in that knowledge came so large a flood of contentment and peace into my heart, that I had no thoughts, no wishes, nothing but the desire that time might last for ever thus. We young girls, when first we give up our hearts, think less of ourselves, Marion, than of the object we love. I could have borne to see Alan married to anyone who would make him happy, and chase from his eyes that look of profound melancholy which melted me day by day. I studied the characters of the different girls whom I met in society, with the intention of discovering one deserving of his love, and I felt (so unselfish, so fearless is true love) that when I did do so, I would point out her attractions, speak of her, love her, court her myself for him, and take that happy place of sister as I first desired; but though I discovered more than one, amiable, beautiful, all he could wish, my endeavours proved fruitless.

"'Ah, grandmamma,' I exclaimed one day to her, 'I wish you would assist me,' and I told her all my thoughts, and the affection I had for him, and how I wished to prove it.

“‘My love, your efforts are useless; Sir Alan never intends to marry.’

“‘Wherefore not, grandmamma? No one seems to me more suited for a domestic life; I am convinced he would suffer no longer from that depression of loneliness, if he had a happy sweet wife to make up to him for the want of all other ties.’

“‘My child, he cannot marry; his father forbade him in his will.’

“‘Oh,’ said I, ‘what a daring iniquity is that which prompts a man leaving this world, conscious that he has done with it for ever, neither duty nor tie binding him more, to leave another shackled with his whims, burdened with a command which gathers a growing chain of galling weight, and he unable to return from the grave to free him.’

“‘My grandmother sought to stay my words; he was there, May, he had heard me. But I did not blush or fear; my interest in him was too great, too pure.

“‘He looked so eager, so intensely anxious, that, with a half apology for thus meddling in his affairs, I hurriedly said:—

“‘I was telling my grandmother of the numerous pretty girls we met last night, and how I wished you knew Miss Grey better.’

“‘I stammered; indeed, May, for a moment I was aghast at my own forwardness.

“‘Your grandmother knows, if you do not, that few girls can bear a contrast to yourself. If I have appeared callous or indifferent to all I have seen, believe me, I am not singular in regarding no one when you are by.’

“‘Tears of mortification filled my eyes. The love in my heart for him was not to be sanctified by sacrifice.

“‘Kythe,’ he said (how is it that some voices exercise such an influence over the heart, and that I listened to his, as the charmed snake listens to the soft flute, becoming motionless, pulseless, rather than lose a note?), ‘Kythe, my father was a just man. He left that command for my own good; and, until I saw you, I murmured not. Before your grandmother, I tell you, that she may encourage me to fulfil my father’s wishes, I love you, oh! how I love you, Kythe. Cease to point out to me the merits, the beauties of others. Though I cannot marry you, I may love and worship you, as I do now—now.’ May, did you love your husband?”

Cold as an icy blast came a shivering tremor through Marion’s frame.

"Dearest, you know what love is, the love of a wife for her husband."

"Yes, whispered Marion, "it is like the breath we draw, as the life that God gives, the pulse of the heart."

"Then so did I love Alan. If he was not to marry, neither would I; we would be brother and sister. But our grandmother counselled him to flee (as she termed it) from temptation. If I did wrong, May, I have been rightly punished. I lured him on. Hitherto, I had been girlishly reserved; I now poured forth for him every gift that God had bestowed on me; I laid myself out to delight and gladden him. His adopted sister should be better to him than ten wives. In very guilelessness of heart I did this, Marion, unwotting that what was happiness to me was torture to him. Our grandmother grew weaker—soon she was unable to leave her room. Again and again I besought my brother to come and see me, I was so low about her, and the news from India was so tantalising. And he came, I could see it, with a joy unspeakable—he came, because he could not help it.

"Each day I told my grandmother, each day she looked more grave; then she sent for Alan, bidding me leave him alone with her; and, in solitude, I whispered to myself hot and angry words, and a new fierce nature came into my soul. I could barely find my own true self in the chaos of passion and vexation that beset me. She was about to urge him again to fly, and if he adopted her advice, if he did go, if I was to see him no more, never hear his voice again—Ah, Marion, ere I had time to tell myself what I would do, his arms were round me. Sanctioned by my grandmother, he was asking me to be his wife. I know not to this day wherefore she changed, unless it was she knew me better than I did myself. She judged that, having once loved, I should prefer any life, would endure any grief, but never love again. I think she must have written some such words to our parents. We were not to consider ourselves really engaged, she said, until their blessing and sanction arrived. It came. In the ecstasy of reading their consent, I heeded no qualifying circumstances, no deprecatory remarks, which also were probably softened in pity to my grandmother. We might marry. They were all coming home—would be present at the ceremony. Oh, delight most fleeting, but so wonderfully great, that even now, Marion, I thank God for the remembrance of it."

CHAPTER LII.

KYTHE'S HISTORY—CONTINUED.

"I WOULD not permit Alan to feel any remorse—I could not understand it. I was happy, blest, all but in one respect. Again was war too threatening to hope that my father would soon be released; and the sickness of heart that was felt all the more strongly because of the previous anticipations, was too much for my feeble grandmother.

"‘Child,’ said she, one night, ‘I shall live to see none of them, and you will be left to await their arrival alone. Little as your engagement to Alan is known, still it will ooze out, and the world will demand for you a proper chaperon until your parents arrive. That is now so uncertain, I know of none upon whom you have the right to claim a protracted wardship. If you will marry Alan, if nothing can induce you to give up the idea, do it at once. I will give your parents ample reason to justify the step, and at least my remaining days, so few, chilled with protracted hope, will be comforted by seeing you happy—by knowing that you are in need of no other guardianship, in case of my death. Whatever may be your fate, Kythe, take your grandmother’s blessing. You will do your duty, and if misfortune is to follow an act against which we took, as we thought, especial pains to guard you, at least no one will bear it with more fortitude. You owe it to your own character that your wishes were regarded by me.’

"Marion, you have heard enough to judge that I alone am to blame, if no blessing attended the marriage.

"It took place immediately, in the simplest, most unostentatious manner. We loved each other so well, we took upon us these new vows with such solemnity, that a crowd, a pageant, a public revelry would have shocked and troubled us both. A mutual friend alone attended us, at the earliest canonical hour, and we took no further recreation than that of waiting most tenderly on our grandmother, besides writing long, happy letters to India.

"Our grandmother lived but one week after our marriage.

It was as if she could bear no further burden. Carefully as we read the papers to her, they were too full of war for us to hide anything. The news of our mother, too, was harassing.

“My children, go to them; go and see your mother, I will burden you no longer.”

“And she did not.

“As Alan read the evening prayers in her room, I saw the aged hands fall, clasped as they were.

“Ere I could whisper one word, there was no more sorrow or care for her. She was hearing for the first time the melody of heaven, and the voice she had hitherto loved was unnoticed and inaudible.

“How we comforted each other, Alan and I—it was balm in itself to feel we might mourn together. One week before, and how insupportable would have been our grief. But I linger so long on this time, I must hasten.

“After writing to you all, detailing every circumstance, we followed up our grandmother's last desire, by fixing a time for joining you, waiting but the answer to say where it should be; meantime, we would repair to my Alan's Scotch home, where, in anticipation of a long absence, it was necessary that he should arrange his affairs, and leave everything on such a plan that no fears might attend the pleasure we anticipated; our people should be left happy; comfortable arrangements should be settled regarding winter and sickness. A school should be built. Many, many things are to be done, too tedious to detail, but sufficient to keep us daily employed for a few happy months. This was to be our honeymoon.

“We had a Highland welcome. If I traced some compassion, or heard a pitying expression, it fell unheeded. Our home was so beautiful. The air was of that fresh yet soft description that exhilarates the frame, rendering fatigue unknown. The hills, bare and grand, impressed fine thoughts on the soul as you gazed on them, but you know my home. I was not sorry that we were bid to wait your arrival from India. My mother's state justified immediate steps for your return. I prepared to receive you all. Meantime, but one thing appeared strange to me, and that was the constant presence of the old Scotchman, Kirke. He had not greeted me with any warmth or kindness, though apparently a most favoured and attached servant of the family. His appearance was unprepossessing, his nature as rugged as the bare hills, and knowing nothing, uncouth and rude in his manners, he yet ruled the house, my husband, all of

us. Presuming upon his being so unfit for the head servant of the house, I said to Alan:—

“Why do you not pension off old Kirke? He is not suited for the establishment of a large house.”

“Marion, my husband let fall upon my ear the first harsh sound of anger and dissent at this, what I deemed, most befitting request. Like many a young wife, I was anxious my house should be a model of order; and Kirke, as head servant, was inefficient in every way. But so that my husband was pleased, so that I never should hear again such words in the home that was to be so sacred and holy a place to me, I cared nothing for that unfitness. On the contrary, I set myself resolutely to work, to soften down and gloss over any unpleasantness that might arise from his incapacity. And, God be praised, the kind, good-hearted man understood and assisted me. For, sister, without that rare, curious specimen of the human race, without his love and care, you would have no sister. It was fortunate for me that I gained his affections.

“Well, sister, always dearly loved; you know it, Marion, though fate has forbidden its expression.”

“Yes, Kythe, I feel it.”

“Then, sister, we lived the life of Adam and Eve before they lost Paradise. In the beautiful country duties of life, blessing as you blest, we past our time. We ornamented our house, thanking God for placing our lot in such pleasant lines. We improved our cottages, grateful for the thanks our tenants poured on us. We saw with pleasure the good that was arising from our schools—the advantage of our example; and amid all this we still lived, through books, in the busy, whirling, bustling world; we read to improve ourselves and our people, we had money to do so—health, strength, the will.”

Kythe paused, while Marion caressed her.

“God was about to add to us another blessing—you know I have five children, Marion.”

“Yes, sister,” answered Marion, with a deep sigh.

“I was meditating, one day, as to how I should tell Alan of this new happiness in store for us, when Kirke approached me.

“My leddy, hoo is it yer no riding with Sir Alan to-day?”

“I did not feel very well,” I answered.

“He shook his head, and looked at me sorrowfully.

“‘I kenned this life wouldna last,’ he said at last. ‘But excuse me, my leddy, if ye luve him, and hae ony wish to fend off

an evil day, dinna tell him the news ye are thinking on, whiles ye can hide it.'

"You may well believe, Marion, I was very angry both at his impertinence and his advice. But he besought me so earnestly to bear with him, pointed out so strongly all his love and devoted acts for the family, besides beseeching me to follow his advice, or I should rue it, that I could do no less than execute all he wished. At least, I thought, it shall be through no fault of mine, that any evil occurs to my Alan, which Kirke seems to insinuate.

"So nothing occurred, Marion, until I had a box from London, of clothes, fitted for the innocent being who was to add to our happiness. With what delight I viewed the little delicate things, longing to show them to my husband; but, ah! my sister, my Marion, I had forgotten. Pardon me, love, I will pass over this part as quickly as I can; but it is necessary to allude to it, as it contains the thread of my story.

"I was called away while thus engaged, but I purposely left the little things all in full view. 'I may surely now,' I thought, 'let Alan see what happiness is in store for us.'

"He came in shortly after, and I knew would go and seek me in my favourite room. But I refrained from joining him at first, partly that he might recover from what I knew he would now guess was the case, and partly to nerve myself against a perturbation of feeling.

"Soon I heard a violent noise, loud angry tones, and Kirke's voice in expostulation struck upon my ear. The other voice was familiar, yet I was certain I had never heard such sounds before.

"I descended, half in fear, when I met Kirke, his countenance, his whole manner, that of a person bewildered with some sudden blow. When he saw me, he composed his features, as if by a miracle.

"'Oh! my leddy, dinna gang in there; we hae met in an accident, Sir Alan and me, and thae pratty little braw things hae been speeled, and they a catchen fire and got burnt. I hanna saved one, my leddy, and I humbly beg yer pardon. But dinna ye gang in there the noo. Bide a wee, until Sir Alan has gotten owre his vexation.'

"But I must not weary you with my long story. When I saw my husband, Marion, some sudden and direful change had come over him. So far from speaking to me of the event so interesting to us both, that he now must have known, he hardly

uttered a word the whole evening. A gloom and horror seemed to have come over him, and when I walked across the room, to seat myself near him, to caress and talk to him as usual, he shuddered as his eyes watched me. Then, in a low voice, he said:—

“‘Good night, Kythe; I have business to do which will keep me up late, so that I may not see you again.’

“The next morning I heard that both he and Kirke were absent, having gone off in the night, no one knew whither. For a week, Marion, I was left alone in this terrible uncertainty, without a line, without a word. In my heart I began to accuse Kirke as the author of all my uneasiness.

“Fortunately, just as my patience was exhausted, they returned. But never, Marion, from that hour, did I know perfect happiness again. A constraint hung over my husband; sometimes he was merry and lively, but it was not genuine gaiety. At others he seemed restless and moody, and more often than not, he shuddered at my touch.

“At last my time drew near, and Kirke came to me, with tears in his eyes, entreating me to send my Alan away on some pretence.

“‘You are barbarous,’ I said to Kirke; ‘I cannot—I will not.’

“‘Oh, my leddy, do. I hae kenned Sir Alan when he was na an hour auld, and his heart is aye that tender, he will hae some fit maybe, when ye are no to the fore.’

“‘What folly is this?’ I exclaimed. ‘I can listen to you no more.’

“‘Oh, my leddy, my leddy, be guided by poor Kirke, ax him hisel if he hasna beezeness in Edinbro’ If he says “ay” quickly, then ye’ll ken he thinks it best he gangs; if he doesna, I’ll say nae mair.’

“I thought it no harm to try this experiment, and, to my surprise, Alan said quickly, ‘Yes, yes; when shall I go?’ It was clear he understood for what, Marion. So he went, and but just in time, Kirke with him.

“I bore my trouble alone, with no loving hand to soothe me, but my hired servants. In the evening, I lay, with my little son beside me, and wept to think no father had kissed and blessed this priceless gift, and for how long it would be so, I knew not.

“On the third day, in answer to the doctor’s letter announcing the event, I had a hurried, but most loving, letter from my hus-

band. It was very incoherent, asking no less than three times, 'Has he your eyes, Kythe?' and ending with, 'If he has, I will return to-morrow to bless him.'

"I had lamented that my babe showed no likeness to his father, but this promise made me look upon his presumed likeness to myself as a boon to be prized.

"He returned. Kirke saw the child first, and then, as the nurse told me afterwards, he called his master, and said he might come and look at his babe without fear. Then he kissed and blessed his child, but I was left with an undefined dread at my heart, unable to account for these strange things.

"We now returned to our old life, and in some degree were happy. Alan grew fond of his boy, and said he was glad to have two pair of dark eyes to kiss. 'As your mother will tire of such things,' he added, 'if I kiss them too often, my boy. Nevertheless, sometimes he was absent from me for a month together, for no reason that I could discover, Kirke always going with him.

"The weeks and months flew; you were all still absent. I was expecting another child. This time I made no secret of it and again my husband seemed to have a moody fit. It was curious also, that in again preparing the little things necessary whatever was exposed to view, or that I left in my work-basket disappeared—I never saw it again.

"Do you mean to take my husband away this time?' I asked Kirke.

"It is so best, my leddy,' he answered.

"But fate ordained otherwise. I was taken ill suddenly; nevertheless, all went on well; of my own accord I banished Alan. His nervousness was greater than my own.

"This little boy was the image of his father; you know what remarkable eyes Alan has, Marion?"

"Yes, sister, I remember they are bright blue in the middle with a black or brown rim all round the iris."

"This boy had the same. For three days I did not see my husband. I was told he was ill. On the fourth I was awakened by a frightful scream in the nurse's room, where lay the baby too. A struggle seemed to ensue, with a horrible noise. My fears made me spring from my bed, and wrapping myself up in a long loose dress, I entered the room. Now, Marion, do you not guess—can you not tell my fate?"

"Go on, sister, go on—suspense is dreadful."

"I saw my husband before me, the little babe of four days

old in his grasp. The nurse was on the floor, thrown there with violence, as she was bleeding. But Marion, one look was enough, one glance of that face I loved so well. I saw it all, the whole truth flashed over me, all Kirke's warnings, all he had tried to hide from me—Marion, do you hear?—he is mad,—my Alan, my husband, my beloved, is insane, and I am without hope, irremediably wretched as wife and mother."

Marion crept into her sister's arms, she kissed her hair, her dress, her mournful eyes, she whispered the fondest, most loving things, she prayed God to help her, bless her, love her, while she trembled with horror at her tale.

Kythe continued it at intervals; but it may be summed up in a few words. Insanity was hereditary in the family. But it had a strange freak; none of them with eyes of one colour ever suffered from the fatal malady; and it was so well known that only those who had the light eyes, with the dark rim, became insane, every precaution was taken, so that, if ungovernably mad, they were removed from home; if quietly so, the faithful old servant, Kirke, was the guardian. Thus it was but little known in the world, and the secret was well kept among themselves.

Sir Alan, notwithstanding his fatal eyes, had shown but very few symptoms of the hereditary madness. His excellent abilities, his charming character, and well-known good qualities, made him universally popular wherever he went. Yet a morbid feeling accompanied him everywhere; he had always the idea before him of going mad. His father and mother dying, and he having no other male relation, their request that the name and family might become extinct was acceded to by him, and as long as he held to it he was happy.

But love for the beautiful Kythe Flower so overmastered every other feeling, that, as we have seen, it ended in their marriage, and until the prospect of a child being born, nothing occurred to rouse the incipient germs of insanity.

But from that time, his attacks became frequent; and on the occasion of his discovery that his second child had the fatal eyes of the family, it became ungovernable—in a fit of raving madness, he tried to destroy the child, and the sight of his pale, terror-stricken wife at the door, proving to him that he could guard no longer from her the terrible secret that, with Kirke's assistance, he had tried to withhold, made him worse.

Kythe was carried insensible to the bed from which she did not rise for months, but not before she had seen the terrible

straight-waistcoat thrown over her frantic husband by the ever-watchful Kirke; and the gibbering mocking face that was dragged from her sight never left her remembrance. The little child was not seriously injured; the nurse was but too glad, for the lady's sake, to keep the matter quiet. Thus nothing transpired.

When Kythe rose from her long illness, she found her husband well, and in his senses. In some respects, the knowledge that he had now no secret to hide from her was beneficial. She learnt in time, with all the strength of strong love, to understand his state of mind and health, so as to be able to judge when he might be attacked.

At times, of his own accord, he would leave her, and go with the faithful Kirke to a retired cottage, when, the violent fit over, he would return to his Kythe, thanking God that he was permitted this boon.

But Marion ceased to wonder that her sister had sent her from their home to that of her uncle, for no apparent reason but caprice. All was explained.

Filled with love and awe for a character so beautiful, she said:—

“God bless my Kythe, and make me worthy to be her sister.”

But Kythe still wept, and wrung her hands.

“Ah! Marion, you have not yet heard all.”

“Sister, I have heard enough. I beg of God pardon for all my murmurings, all my wayward sorrow. You can have no fate more dreadful to tell me.”

“Yes, Marion, listen, you sorrowing little mother. You love your children.”

“Alas, Kythe, you know that weeping for them has brought me to this state.”

“Do you think I love mine?”

“Fondly, devotedly; they must be all you have to comfort you in your unhappy fate.”

“Marion, out of my five children, three have those fatal eyes.”

“Ah! merciful God! Kythe, what have we done, that two only sisters should be thus afflicted.”

“God is merciful; I braved my fate, and must bear it.”

“I will share it with you, Kythe; henceforward, you will let me share all things with you.”

“No, love; your nature is too tender and loving. Besides, you would be but another source of anxiety to me. Did you

hear Kirke's whisper that you were not to be seen, by my husband, in close conference with me?"

"Wherefore, sister?"

"Because, like all insane persons, he is not only suspicious, but morbidly sensitive as to anyone knowing the real truth. Were he to know that I had told you of this awful calamity, he would be seized with an irresistible impulse to kill you, to do anything to you. For months after I knew, at night I was awakened by his whisperings:—'I must kill her; yes, she must die, my Kythe, my wife, by my own hand.' I have heard him rise, Marion, and search the room for some implement wherewith to do it, and knew that if, by the carelessness of a servant, even so much as a pair of scissors were within his reach, my life was at his mercy. And our little children! Think, Marion, tender and loving as he is, they can never be left one moment alone with him."

"Sister, sister, what a cruel fate! Is there to be no end to it—no peace for you?"

"It is hard and cruel for a wife to think that death may release her from a heavy responsibility; and death or permanent insanity will be his fate, Marion, for see how aged he is for his years, and after every attack, he becomes weaker, and more fading. But even if I am to see God take his poor stricken soul to heaven, where I may think of him as clothed in the garments of righteousness, seated, in his right mind, at his Saviour's feet, still are my cares ended. Have I not three other doomed beings to rear, only for madness; three pretty loving children, for whom I cannot pray as for the others, knowing that the health and strength I would ask for them, will but lead them to more terrible destruction? But leave me, Marion, leave me alone with my God for awhile. Alan must not see a trace of sorrow on my face; and for love of me, sister, guard well your own feelings. Thus much you can do for me."

"We are daughters of heroes, Kythe. As women, we cannot fight our country's battles, but the battle of life, we will not flinch from, as becomes our race."

In Kythe's pale face was reflected back the glow on Marion's.

CHAPTER LIII.

MARION MAKES A GREATER CONQUEST THAN ANY SHE HAS YET
ACHIEVED.

As they sat together in the evening, Sir Alan remarked that Marion looked better, her colour was returning. She raised her eyes to assure him. Suddenly, all she had heard in the morning rushed to her mind. With fluttering heart and timid eyes, she stammered an answer. Regarding her attentively, and then his wife, a fierce gleam flashed from his eyes—a strange short laugh broke from his lips.

Instantly Marion rose from her seat, and passing over to one near him, sat down upon it, laying her hand on his arm.

"Dear Alan, I am better, I owe it to you; you brought my Kythe to bless and comfort me," and she looked so steadily and confidingly in his face, that he calmed as by a spell.

"How like your voice is to your sister's, Marion; you both speak low, but so distinctly."

"Then love me for my voice, Alan, and teach me to be another Kythe."

"Ah, Marion, that is demanding too much. Had there been another like her, she might have escaped my clutches," and again one of those sad wild gleams changed his whole countenance.

"But, brother, I have need of your assistance. Very wayward and selfish have I been in my sorrow. I would wish to employ myself to do some good."

"That I can easily promise you. The Scotch people would be scandalized at the condition of your village. Our worthy Aunt Flower was met yesterday, by myself and Kirke, mud-bound in the very centre of it. She had burdened herself with parcels, more in accordance to the dictates of her large heart, than her powers of carrying them. And this fact, coupled with the mud and her petticoats, stranded Aunt Flower."

"Shall we begin to-morrow?" asked Marion, like an eager child. "Are we bereft of all happiness, when we can do good?"

"It is the only panacea for a troubled heart," responded Sir Alan; "and it has this additional blessing, the store it yields

increases with the store demanded, until the copiousness of the one brims up the other and they overflow."

"I would experience this overflow," said Marion.

"You have much to do, my little sister; that is, if you are sole mistress here, and have the power to perform what will cost both money and time."

"I will consult Mr. Hearn. There is one thing I would do at once, but, Alan dear, you must trust yourself alone with me, while I tell it."

In vain Kythe signed to her sister. Frankly she put her hand into her brother's, and drew him from the room, leaving Lady Gordon trembling at her rashness.

"I have not dared to ask Kythe about her children, you will tell me if she pines for them?"

"She would not have left them but for you."

"Say, Alan, shall we send for them unknown to her. In having her children to love, I shall the oftener pray for my own."

Marion felt that Alan's mood was an uncertain one, as the changes in his countenance told her. But she the more confidently besought him, and linked her hands within his arm in sisterly love and trust.

If he had suspected her at all of knowing his real condition, his nature was not proof against her gentle faith in him.

He essayed to calm himself.

"Marion, they cannot all come—they are not fit."

"Therefore, brother, I was the more justified to ask you, not her."

"There are two, our eldest boy and second girl. Our longer absence is—will be an anxiety to Kythe."

"You are to decide, let us send for them."

"And my little Lilius, only because I part not from Kythe, save when God wills it, would I have left that child."

"Then you will send for those three, and make me happy?"

He consented, thanking her. When they returned, Kythe did not look up, no anxiety must her husband see in her.

At night, when they separated, she kissed and blessed Marion (who had never yet slept out of the quaint old chamber high in the gabled roof), saying:—

"Oh, May, how fearless you are; what power you seem to possess by nothing but the clear gaze of those frank eyes! It may be that, through God's blessing in coming to comfort you, I shall find peace myself."

"You are not to fear for me," whispered Marion, "remember."

Over the change that was now daily visible in Marion, Prissy gloated with an intense satisfaction.

"Did not I write that particular letter which brought my cousin Kytie here, and Sir Alan, her husband? It appears to me that I did a very wise thing, and deserve much praise."

Now Prissy said this in the hearing of the only person who was not likely to agree with her. It had formed no part of the design of Beatrice that Marion was to recover her health and spirits. On the contrary, she always intended that she should mope herself to death, as she would not revenge herself upon her husband in other fashion. That hope being over, and Marion engrossed with so many duties and cares, that her former occupation, the indulgence of her sorrow, was now apparently neglected, Beatrice began to fear her elastic spirit would free itself, and that, with returning health and strength, not only hopes, but deeds, would take the place of her blind despondency of woe. Deplorable as the insanity of Sir Alan might be, there was a madness in the brain of Beatrice that was much more so. For it was culpable, seeing she possessed the power to control it, even when it ran to riot the strongest. It was indeed sad to witness the effect of uncontrolled passions on beauty such as that of Beatrice. Hard, indelible lines, cold, keen eyes, a yellow taint, betokening the unhealthy flow of the blood, changed her from the beautiful girl to the disappointed, ill-tempered woman. Absorbed in the one passion of a jealous hatred, like her mother, she entertained no other feeling, and suffered her youth to pass in vain longings. A woman of sense, without much refinement, would, in missing her first mark, have sought out another, and though the hand of Mr. Godfrey Asheton was certainly worthy of a struggle, he yet was not the only eligible *parti* in the county.

But few now felt any inclination to court a lady whose beauty was *passée*, and whose *fierté* of manner was sufficient to frighten the stoutest heart.

Even stupid, kind-hearted Mrs. Flower began to see the change in her step-daughter; and as, in her view of human affairs, nothing could take place without some efficient reason, she wearied herself to discover the cause; her conjectures were more marvellous than correct, winding up with one that became at last in her mind the proper one.

Beatrice was in love, and with Sir Robert Fane. An excellent match! For the sake of Beatrice, she must exert herself,

and with all due observance of feminine punctilio, efforts should be made to bring matters to a happy conclusion. Nothing could be better, as a first step, than a sermon upon matrimony. Nothing could be more easy than for Mrs. Flower to ask Sir Robert's opinion upon the sermon after it was preached. Nothing more natural than that—here Mrs. Flower paused. The vast field of probable remarks that would ensue, all tending to the desirable point, fluttered her. As a school-boy let loose into a cake-shop, she was bewildered by the choice. She had ample time, however, to bring her over-redundancy of ideas into something like order, for Sir Robert was away, abroad. Marion had written to him about the propriety of sending Edward to Eton, and the answer had been received from St. Petersburg.

What had induced Sir Robert to go there was beyond Mrs. Flower's comprehension, but that Beatrice was unhappy about his absence, was clear.

Nevertheless, nothing could be done until he returned, and that sermon was preached. Meantime, it was no wonder that Mrs. Flower could give no reason for Sir Robert's long excursion. He had none to give to himself, unless it was a certain restlessness that made him hate home, hate any place where he was compelled to stay more than a month at a time. He was tired of being a good boy; it was annoying having a conscience. He had been so much worried and harassed for the last eight years, it was only due to himself to think of nothing disagreeable. So he ran about the world in every direction that took him furthest from Mr. Asheton abroad, and Mrs. Asheton at home.

An excursion in a friend's yacht to St. Petersburg—a commission from the Emperor of Russia to select horses for a cavalry regiment, and all the journeys this entailed on him—attending a few races, riding in a steeplechase or two, popping over to Paris, all these employed his time and talents very agreeably, and in some respects profitably.

It is true, Marion's pale face now and then rose up to his mental vision, but he resolutely drove it away. It is true, he very often thought of Beatrice, but, alas for poor Mrs. Flower's golden dreams and innocent simplicity, he never recalled her without dismissing her remembrance with a remark which did more than insinuate "She was somebody down below in petticoats."

CHAPTER LIV.

THE SISTERS CHANGE PLACES.

It was characteristic of Marion's nature to go herself to meet the children of her sister, accompanied by the delighted Prissy. Alan was to bring Kythe to tea, in the flower-garden at Asheton Court, where the meeting was to take place, unknown to the mother. The train was due at five; at half-past Marion would have conferred upon another the happiness she was without the hope of experiencing herself. But disinterestedness was the groundwork of her character, and it may fairly be questioned who felt the most joy, the one sister, who received the objects of a secret anxiety, unexpectedly, or the other, who had been the means of bringing them to her.

Osman and Marion were beautiful and healthy children, with features and eyes resembling their mother. The eldest girl, Liliás, had her father's eyes, but the dark and light rim were so strangely contrasted, as to give the child the vague stare of idiocy. Not that she was so, for she was the first to throw herself into Marion's arms, and vehemently demand her father.

As if she was a baby still, she lay back in those arms when they were settled in the carriage, stroking Marion's hands and hair, and murmuring to herself—

"Pretty, pretty; I shall see papa, soon I shall see papa."

As he lifted her out of the carriage, she gave an unearthly scream of joy, and clinging to his neck, refused to leave him or greet her mother.

It appeared to be well understood between the parents that her behaviour was natural, for Kythe took no heed of her waywardness.

"Now, May, I have nothing to wish for, we will spend the summer here; the change will not only be beneficial to the children, but to Alan and myself. We have endured so much at home, the very remembrance of it is painful."

"When you return, I will go with you, sister."

"Then, May, it will be home again to me. How I love you, dear; but it is a love mixed with something so holy, I know not how to describe it."

"You have no need, for perhaps it is but what I feel for you.

Now to work hard, Mr. Hearn says I may use 'that money' in any way I choose. I think it will serve a more just purpose, to beautify the village and improve the estate, than that for which it was originally intended. A charm will attend it now; there was a curse upon it before."

"Oh, my May, be not bitter."

Marion put her hand on Kythe's mouth. It appeared that the youngest sister would ere long control the elder. Edward was to go to Eton after midsummer, and Marion was not sorry he should have companions to prepare him previously. He was very loath to go, and she to lose him, but even as the tears filled her eyes when she spoke to him of the loss he would be to her, he knew there would be no evasion. If it was for his good, Aunt May would regard no sorrow on either part.

Meantime all their mornings were employed in the various duties of education. Kythe instituted herself Marion's governess as well as her children's. All the afternoon Marion spent with Sir Alan, riding or walking about, superintending improvements.

If Lady Gordon had done violence to her own secret wishes in imparting to any other heart than her own the dreadful secret which had so long separated her from the world, and deprived her of all the consolations of sympathy, she now blessed God that she had done so.

Peaceful, nay happy, passed her days, and while Marion never showed the slightest perception of the mystery, Kythe was well aware that she never forgot it. She saw it in her soft and gentle manner to Sir Alan, in the care she took to amuse him, in the half coaxing, half lively girlish fascination with which she willed to have her own way, charming his gloomy moods, as David charmed the evil spirit of Saul, by the music of her words.

And lured on by an affection so true, so trusting, a change imperceptibly came over him. His eyes lost their restless wild look, his brow cleared, he smiled naturally—gleams of insane rage no longer flitted over his countenance, and the short, strange laugh was unheard.

"My leddy," said Kirke, one day, when again he found his place a sinecure, and that Marion had gone off in sole charge of Sir Alan; "hae ye telled the young madam a'?"

"Yes, Kirke; she knows everything."

"She is venturesome; she's like the dew of a summer night to his owre heated brain."

"Do you think there is danger to her, Kirke?"

"Na, my leddy, I dinna; she has a brave heart and a clear eye. He darena' hurt one wi' luiks so fearless at him. The shadow of the Almighty is, mabe, on her. She is safe—and he hasna' wranged her, ye ken; but it's foine to see that bit slight lassie-like thing trusting herself wi' a raving madman."

"Oh, Kirke, hush! you alarm me. I must warn her."

"Ye'll ken, my leddy, Sir Alan's cough is waur; as lang as that bides, we need na trouble."

Lady Gordon's tears fell.

"I hardly thought this happiness would last."

"Dinna greet; kep up yer brave heart. Ye hac suffered mair nor ten of the worsenist sinners, and the Lord is granting ye a bit rest. Tak it, my puir leddy, and be aye thankful; it's no' in'man to tell what ills is o' the road."

"Not that, not that, Kirke, I could not bear that."

"Ou ay, did ye ever?" growled the old man in anger; "I am thinking she wad dee i' the stocks o' misery, better nor miss him."

He touched his hat, more, as it appeared, because he would not be unjust, and left her, still growling to himself.

There was something yet concealed that Kytne had not confided to Marion. It was something that touched her heart as if the hot spark of a furnace burnt in a wound that made her shrink and tremble with the slightest breath.

As she walked down to the village, now being beautified and adorned, with a taste and judgment that was duly appreciated by the villagers, she met Alan and Marion returning.

"Oh, Kytne, how good is this life! Conferring so much pleasure by such simple means; and discovering so much that is good, honest, and quaint in the people, and their tenderheartedness, sister. They keep their children out of sight that I may not be pained at their happiness, while I am bereft. Alan, we must have the school built soon. All children shall be to me as my children. God will bless mine while I do my duty by these."

The contrast between her earnest face and the pale attenuated countenance of her husband struck Kytne forcibly.

She must speak to Marion that very evening.

"My May," she began, "I wished not only to thank you for all your sweet love to my poor Alan, but to warn you not to be too rash. You know we may not trust him."

"Do not be anxious, Kytne; Alan has himself told me all."

"Marion! impossible!"

"He has; all those smothered, pent-up feelings that have been withering his brain for years. It is only when he thinks of you and his children that remorse drives him wild."

"I guessed this, May"

"Then, sister, as if to relieve his heart, he has told me many things, and whatever he said I have written down. I do not wonder at your love for one so good—so unfortunate."

"Do you think he has a purpose in all this, May, and does he know you wrote down all he says?"

"He has a purpose, sister; and he knows that I record his words, for he says, 'Mark, Marion, this is for my angel to know, this is for my wife to learn, when—'"

"When what, Marion? why do you pause?"

"Sister, you did not tell me all about Alan."

"How, Marion?"

"Concerning this fatal malady. That it assumes two forms."

"What had it to do with my one misery, Marion?"

"Alan dwells much upon it."

Kythe sighed.

"Yes, sister, he dwells with happiness on the idea that he may die in your arms, a conscious, sane man."

Quickly came half sobs from Lady Gordon's heart. At intervals she spoke thus:—

"'Tis true, Marion, when consumption attacks any of his fated race, the brain seems relieved, and the more the disease gains ground, the more sane they become. But when the lungs are relieved, the consumptive symptoms mitigated, insanity shows itself. Thus it has ever been, Marion. Marion, am I to take comfort from this?"

"He does, sister; he loves to dwell upon the hope of dying, conscious of the Redeemer's love, the mercy of God, the bliss of an eternity, with your eyes upon him leading him to think of heaven, your arms round him to prove your love and forgiveness."

"I cannot—oh! Marion, I cannot give him up. May, May, let me keep him as he is; he knows me at intervals, he loves me always. I never feared him in his wildest fits. Oh, Alan, my husband, my beloved, did I ever speak of your death as a relief? Did I ever in thought murmur at my fate, if, at happy intervals, I could yet claim you as my own?"

"He knows all this, sister, just as if he read your heart; and while he thinks with pleasure of his enfeebled strength, and the

warning symptoms of the more fatal, but less painful, malady, he wishes me to prepare you. Think, sister, how good God has been. Just as we require the love of each other, we have it. Had I been engrossed with other ties, I could not do as now I do—throw myself into your arms as your devoted Marion, ready to serve you.”

“But I see no symptoms; you are mistaken, darling Marion, he is mistaken. Let him be as he is, I love him all the same. He is my Alan, my husband, whether ill or well.”

“Ask Kirke, sister; he will tell you that your husband’s health is failing.”

“He has told me—it is done.”



CHAPTER LV.

MR. ASHETON BEGINS TO DISCOVER HE IS A COMMON MORTAL.

MR. ASHETON had now been a year at Carrara, including the three hot months spent in the mountains.

During that time his children experienced the life their father had desired for them. They had no other society than his, the consul’s, and that of their teachers.

He was compelled to acknowledge, wearied and heart-sick, that they were not growing up into the companions he desired.

Being volatile, active children, their British blood rose above the evils of the climate, affecting them more by incessant restlessness and ill-humour, than by the usual inertness and indolence. As they had no companions of their own age with whom to work off their superabundance of activity, the labour of amusing them fell upon their father, whose heavy heart and natural gravity of character was wholly unfitted for the task. Thus, they were more familiar with the servants, more shrewd regarding the small sins of their tutors, than they would have been under any other circumstances.

Gossip of a foolish sort began to be relished by them as something to enliven their monotonous lives, and as they freely told their father everything (which had always been their

characteristic), it is not to be comprehended what the fastidious ears of the refined Mr. Asheton heard from lips that he had intended should pour forth exalted and noble sentiments, as the maiden in the fairy tale dropped pearls and rubies, roses and lilies.

It may be questioned if Mr. Asheton, bitterly as he had long felt his mistake, ever endured a sharper pang than when his intelligent boy told him, in mischievous delight, that the governess was in love with the tutor, and that the tutor was in more admiration of his sister's attendant. Dismissing both in a peremptory mood, until he could find others, he instructed the children himself, and in doing so discovered they were lamentably ignorant on the simplest matters. And while Rupert's fine disposition saved him from much evil, the little girls had no escape. Mabel was a peevish, fretful baby, though five years old, and Issa, he could not but acknowledge, was an exemplification of all the besetting sins of the Ashetons. He saw that nature laid bare in the child, and loathed it.

"Father," answered Rupert, after having been reproved three or four times for yawning, "I would do anything to please you, but I do not wish to be a gentleman."

"And what would you be?"

"A hunter of the woods, or, as the consul says he once was, a squire, with hounds and horses, guns and dogs. Oh, father, I hate Cicero, and all the pack of them. Why do we not go home, and be squires at once?"

"Home?" echoed his father.

"Yes, home; everywhere, in every place to which we have been, I have expected to see a beautiful house, with a portico, and high steps up to the front door. Now, father, this is no fancy or dream; it must have been my home. I see a flower-garden, and the rose-trees are so high, and an old gentleman lifts me up that I may smell them, and he kisses me—always he kisses me—whenever I come near him. And my grandmamma, I see her also, leading Issa by the hand. Issa could just walk. But, father, that is not all. I see some one going in and out among the rose-trees, gathering them. She is unlike anyone I have seen anywhere, but her hair resembles Mabel's, and her eyes would be like mine, only there is something strange in them. They are always looking at me, as if they loved me more than anything in the world. Papa, I could love her, and do anything she bid me, because she asks me to do so, with her eyes. Where is she now? Why have we not seen her all these years? Was she my mother?"

"Rupert, forbear—leave me for a time."

"Father, I am sorry. Tell me that you forgive me. If my mother is alive, I should not like her to hear I was undutiful to you. Give me that old Cicero, and I will study him in the garden until you call me. And you will tell her, will you not?"

Mr. Asheton could not understand the strange delight that ran through his veins as the boy spoke of his mother. For a year he had not heard her name—had not spoken one word of her. And even in his thoughts he had endeavoured to drive her image away. But she was there impressed upon his innermost heart. And like the veriest youth in love, he drank in the boy's remembrance of her. Yet what was she now? He had never even in his hottest anger, believed her to have been more than imprudent, which, in his morbid selfishness, was sufficient to justify the act of deserting her. But in the loftiness of his own nature, he judged that the silent manner in which he had treated that imprudence was in itself sufficient to arrest her further progress. As his course of action was one of high trust, so would hers seek to emulate it. And what then? Ah! he panted to know what then? If it were indeed so, that the love so well remembered by her son, as emanating from her eyes, had resumed its power, that, in gratitude for his forbearance, she had devoted herself to clearing the name of Asheton from ever the shade of a slur, then once more they would be happy.

Indeed, he would acknowledge he had been the guiltier of the two. His wish to separate the children from their mother was unnatural, unpious. He had forgotten the laws of God, he had been unmindful of the duties of a man, he had acknowledged no other rule than his own headstrong wishes, had listened to no voice but the voice of Asheton pride.

He would allow all this, but when?

As his only companion, the consul at Carrara, Mr. Courtenay had become more privy to Mr. Asheton's thoughts, than a ten years' acquaintance at Asheton Court would have made him.

He conjectured some unhappy event at home kept him abroad. He ransacked the English newspapers of the time that Mr. Asheton appeared at Carrara, if haply some clue might be given him in them. Being a practical man, of plain good sense, who had mixed a good deal with the world, and had experienced some of the strange kicks that fortune will now and then give even her favourites, he readily understood Mr. Asheton's character, and finally was glad to think it was rather some irritating crotchet in his own mind that banished Mr. Asheton from

England, than a calamity which would be permanent in its woful results.

He conjectured that the mother of these fine but perverse children was dead, and that they suffered in consequence from the want of that sacred influence which begins in the cradle, and ends only with death. For though but an old bachelor himself, he was so rather from an over-estimation of what is due to the weaker sex. As long as Fortune was kind to him, he meditated adding the greatest charm to his household, provided a lady could be found sufficiently sweet-tempered to bear with his sportsmanlike habits; but the moment she frowned, he pursued his solitary way, without a thought of burdening any other heart than his own with the weight of providing for their daily bread.

To him Mr. Asheton was indebted for a new study, which both interested and benefited him. It was that of the Bible.

"I find it necessary," remarked Mr. Courtenay, "to have an answer always ready for the priests. Part of their religion consists in making proselytes, and as I am condemned to dwell in the dominions of the Pope, there is the more need that I should be capable of arguing with them. I believe they have been rather attentive to you lately," continued he.

Mr. Asheton smiled faintly, in assent.

"I do not blame them; their lives are monotonous enough, and I give them credit for genuine feeling, when they rejoice over a heretic saved. But still, I should be disgraced in my own eyes, if I could not give answer for answer, and rather more besides. The religion that keeps itself pure amid what is both seducing and self-complacent, ought to be able to rear its head as our gray mountains do from the olive woods and peopled plains of the lower earth, clear, lofty, indisputable."

"You utter that remark for me, Courtenay; it is true, I have suffered the priests to go further with me than I intended. I had an aching void in my heart, and the whim grew within me, that I might fill it with the forms of a religion in which I was promised everything. I will adopt your advice, and judge for myself."

After his conversation with Rupert, Mr. Asheton, unable to compose his thoughts, unlocked his desk, and took from it a miniature. Hurriedly, without opening it, he put it in his pocket, and, calling Rupert to him, set off in search of Mr. Courtenay amid the quarries. Rupert enjoyed these excursions as his chiefest happiness, and visited the many rough studios

and sheds containing inestimable works of art, in various stages of progression, with the pleasure and devotion of an age much older than his own.

He had many friends among the students; and while occupying himself with one of these, who good-naturedly suffered him to try his hand at chiseling, Mr. Asheton drew Mr. Courtenay aside:—

“I have long wished to have a statue made,” began Mr. Asheton, his voice considerably agitated. “Will you offer my order to any one of the students, the chiefest? Spare no money. She must be in the attitude of listening, one curl having fallen. Here is the likeness.”

“Stay, stay; such an order as this, my dear sir, cannot be dismissed in so cursory a manner. Good heavens, how beautiful!” Mr. Courtenay had opened the miniature.

“Their mother, of course; the eyes and hair indicate the likeness; what love in those eyes—what an expression! My dear sir, forgive me, in losing her, your lifetime would be short to mourn her. Oh, that God should have created anything so lovely, only to take her away!”

“Hush! she is not dead.”

Mr. Courtenay looked from Mr. Asheton to the picture, and from the picture to him, for some minutes. Then, with a grave severity he said:—

“The sin lies at your door, whatever may have separated you.”

“It lies at my door.”

“Poor man! poor man! I pity you from my soul. Return, and entreat her forgiveness; she will bestow it for the sake of the children; otherwise, her eyes are the falsest mine ever looked into.”

Mr. Asheton was silent.

“Nothing wicked could dwell under such a surface,” exclaimed Mr. Courtenay, his natural doggedness assuming an irritable attitude.

“I left her; I took her children from her, but with her leave; they loved her too well, too much—and then, and then—I heard a rumour; I was told—you are right, Courtenay, right—no wickedness, nothing but imprudence—”

“And that is false—excuse me, Mr. Asheton; I have respected your high tone of character, while I pitied the morbid weaknesses that blemished it. But if these have led you to be unjust, cruel towards one with a countenance like that—God’s very

touch upon her face—I would as lief have a murderer for a friend.”

Mr. Asheton was silent.

“I am going to England next month. Let me bring you the villain that belied her.”

“In God’s name do so, and win my everlasting gratitude.”

The energy with which Mr. Asheton spoke appeared to satisfy Mr. Courtenay.



CHAPTER LVI.

MR. COURTENAY AGREES WITH MR. ASHETON’S JUDGMENT OF HIMSELF.

THAT night, when the children were all wrapt in slumber, Mr. Courtenay appeared; and, as if a half-confidence was of little use, and, indeed, with that inexplicable feeling which makes a cankering grief, or some other emotion, pour itself forth (nature indemnifying herself for an over-curb by an overflow), Mr. Asheton told his whole history to Mr. Courtenay. There was so much of ignorance of the world, so much of self-delusion regarding Ashetons, so credulous a faith in absurdities, so marvellous an abhorrence of common sense, that as Mr. Courtenay listened, he would have wept over the one, as he laughed at the other. Nevertheless, he was, with all his acuteness, unable to disentangle Mr. Asheton’s story, so as to bring it into such a tangible shape that he could grasp and unriddle it at one and the same moment.

He of course knew nothing of Miss Beatrice Flower and her secret wishes.

Of Mrs. Trevor, he heard only that she was a fondly-attached sister, devoted to her brother, but too enthusiastic to be wise in her judgment. If he had been asked his opinion of her character, after hearing Mr. Asheton’s story, he would have said, “She was a weak, rather silly, but affectionate person.” Alas! for the clever one of the family, Mrs. Trevor Asheton that ought to have been.

But of Sir Robert Fane, he received a still more erroneous impression; and knowing nothing at all of the will concerning

the Rollinston estates, Mr. Courtenay made up his mind, from all he heard of him, that to Sir Robert Fane he would go, as the kind-hearted, worthy brother who would rush headlong to establish friendly relations between the husband and wife. But as for the young count, Mr. Courtenay was inclined to think dark things of him; and considered it probable that he must hunt him out, first and primarily, prove that his madness was a sham, call him out on the spot as a demonstration of his belief, and in shooting him do the world, and Mrs. Asheton in particular, a very great service.

"Well, I forgive you, Mr. Asheton—as a man, I forgive you for misjudging a woman, as you appear to have misjudged your wife. But I only can do so as I look at her portrait. Her eyes would look hardly on me if I did not. Sweetest creature! Talk to me of her being ignorant, uneducated—why, my dear sir, look at her, what countenance could be more intelligent; and the love, the mother's love, in her eyes! Would she not teach her children the very language of heaven? I forgive that young count too. Really he was not so mad. I cannot but think, however, there has been underhand work—your sister now, was she at all jealous, do you think, of your pretty wife?"

"Perhaps—yes—I fear she was."

"Ha! ha! ha! humph, silly people are more given to jealousy than any others. Ha! ha! I see my way—the fog rises—a light shines on me."

Mr. Courtenay half muttered, half thundered this out, like the notes touched by an inexperienced finger on an organ.

Mrs. Trevor was probably as bad as the count. Was there a Mr. Trevor? Time would show. Mr. Courtenay would like to have the horsewhipping of some one. Mr. Asheton deserved it as much as any one.

"Pray, Sirr (Mr. Courtenay had a way of sounding his r's when excited), did it never strike you, that owing to the malevolence of some individual (would I could catch 'em) your wife's name being placed in juxtaposition with some other name, through no fault of hers, it was the duty, the pleasure of her husband, her protector, her guardian, to have flown to her side—supported, upheld, loved, idolised her more than ever. Let me catch anyone tampering with my wife's name. By heaven! I would walk through England from one end to the other, she on my arm, and challenge the world to utter another word. I would pay court to her as if she was a queen, I would obey her slightest word, I would prize her smallest favour—I

would see no other woman when she was by—and it should be through no fault of mine if slander did not slink away like a whipt cur, and malice go down to the place from which the evil natures of men are mad enough to draw her. Oh! I would, I would—oh! the base sin of leaving that poor young thing to face what you could not face alone. Do you hear, sir? You feared to encounter the breath of a rumour, and you expect she will bear the full brunt. Have you heard nothing from her?”

“Nothing.”

“Very right; I’d scorn it, if I was her—very right; I admire her.”

“Courtenay, you forget. I was justified—my children—the name of Asheton.”

“Children, name, character, fortune, life, everything might go to the whirlwinds—but my wife—my wife is my wife—she was myself—the best part—the essence of myself. If you would live honoured, regarded, you must respect yourself, ere you have the right to demand that of others.”

“By the misery I have felt, by the remorse, the futility of all my attempts at peace of mind and happiness, I know what you say is true.”

“Go to her then; why don’t you go now—at this moment? Leave the children with me.”

“No, no; I must take them with me. There would be an alloy to her pleasure in seeing me without them.”

“Come, you are not fit to go to her yet. She would but have her troubles over again with you. I was a fool to think that the prejudices of thirty years’ growth and fostering were to be wiped out in five minutes by an honest man’s honest indignation. Act according to your Asheton proprieties. I shall go to England next month, and act for myself.”

But, in truth, Mr. Asheton was not in a condition to do as Mr. Courtenay wished. His health was impaired by his long residence abroad; the habits and food had never agreed with him; his vexations and disappointments touched him more sensibly than they would one of a coarse nature, bringing him into that condition in which his mind was as nervous as his body.

Mr. Courtenay’s indignation bewildered rather than touched him. No Asheton could have deserved such censure. They were just, let them be ever so selfish. Mr. Courtenay, drawn away by the youth and prettiness of the portrait, was no judge

of the very proper and enviable peculiarities of the Asheton race. Wives were nothing, children everything. In fact, it was as Mr. Courtenay said; thirty years of inveterate consecration of themselves could not be knocked down in a moment.

Curbing his indignation as well as he could, Mr. Courtenay set himself the task of bringing the warped and diseased mind of Mr. Asheton into a more healthy condition, indemnifying himself for his forbearance by swearing all sorts of things to the beautiful image with which he was entrusted.

Taking advantage of his position, the purest piece of marble to be found was selected—the most skilful and talented of all the sculptors then at Carrara was entrusted with the work of creating “The Listening Nymph.”

No lover, anxious about the portrait of his lady-love, could have exhibited more anxiety, or taken greater trouble, than Mr. Courtenay about a likeness, the original of which he had never seen.

Every evening that he could spare from his duties he spent with Mr. Asheton; and let them begin upon any other subject, they always ended with the one. Mr. Asheton all unconsciously discovered how he loved and dwelt upon the perfections of the wife he had left so heedlessly, while Mr. Courtenay laid into the stores of one of those retentive brains that belong to matter-of-fact men, every little circumstance relating to anyone in the least connected with “The Listening Nymph.”

All this was to work for fruition in time, thought Mr. Courtenay, while he sowed the seeds of other thoughts for the same purpose in Mr. Asheton's heart, and that so effectually, that had the latter been suddenly told he was never to see his Marion again, he would have belied the idea by instantly starting in search of her.

At present, however, he meant to trust everything to his friend Courtenay. And if, in the vehemence with which he took the part of the deserted Marion, he was more in her favour than he ought to be, Mr. Asheton consoled himself with the idea that it would only be known among themselves, and that, in fact, anything was better than the present state of things.

Wife-sick, home-sick, country-sick, Mr. Asheton walked daily to a stricken and lonely pinetree that reared its gaunt form and bared limbs as in melancholy appeal to heaven for its desolate condition, and sitting at its foot, waited in equal desolation for the return of the consul from England.

CHAPTER LVII.

FORTUNE AT LAST REMEMBERS MRS. TREVOR, AND ASSIGNS HER
A PLACE IN THE WORLD.

DURING the month that Marion spent in Scotland, she was enabled to repay her sister tenfold for the comfort she had been to herself. Alan, also, appeared to rely upon her, the sisters being actuated by but one motive, namely, the wish to render whatever portion of life might be allotted to him serene and peaceful.

As the hectic flush became settled permanently on his hollow cheek, and his cough increased beyond even Kythe's hope that the summer weather would banish it, she became earnest for his removal to another country—a warmer climate.

"If you love me, no," he exclaimed. "Would you doom me to misery, and yourself to worse? No; I am in the hands of God. I am blest, happy beyond any worth in me, ten thousand-fold, thus to die at home among my own people."

To Marion he openly spoke of his approaching death, leaving with her many injunctions, many fond words, which, in carefully writing down, she knew would appear to her sister when the final separation came, as messages from the dead, speaking peace, hope, happiness.

Very sad was it, to one whose heart was so tender, to see Kythe's two youngest children. The oldest a confirmed and hopeless idiot, and the little one, the baby—whose birth had caused his father's last and most violent fit of insanity, during which he had burst the bloodvessel that now caused his present state—so fine, so healthy a child was rarely seen. But strongly developed were the two colours in his eyes, while even in babyhood he exhibited paroxysms of passion as violent as those of his eldest sister. No comfort was to be hoped from these two; as their years increased, their waywardness assumed its true origin—insanity. Excepting to her father, Lillias was beyond the control of any human being; and it was impossible to conjecture in what freak she would exhibit her wildness next. Her clothes had to be made of the strongest materials, and if she could not destroy them with her little white, delicate hands,

she would burn them, cut them, throw herself into any pool or puddle. Yet, desired by her father to be careful, the most delicate muslin, the finest lace, was safe; and as long as she remained in his sight, she was as quiet, gentle, and loving as any little maiden of ten years of age could be. Because her father coughed, she also would cough, and that so vehemently, she brought on a diseased state of the lungs, almost as dangerous as his own, yet it did not relieve the waywardness of her brain.

She loved her Aunt Marion after her father, though she would do nothing that she bid her by order, only from entreaty. Thus it crossed Marion's mind, whether some day it would not be well to take the charge of her, to free Kytte from so sad a care, when her heart would be distracted by the last parting from her Alan. But she was deterred from the idea by discovering how necessary the child was to her father's happiness.

Consoled in the thought of the benefit her presence had been to them all, Marion hurried back, in time to welcome Edward home for his first holidays, and to receive the report of her children's health, regularly forwarded to Mr. Hearn.

Renovated by the bracing air of the North, and glowing with the consciousness of her vocation in the world, the highest given to mortal, that of a dispenser of good, Marion delighted every one on her return by her bloom and elasticity. These were so tempered by the humility of a sacred grief—hallowing every thought, each act, with its sanctity—that she demanded as much respect as admiration. She entered with renewed fervour into all the schemes she had begun under the auspices of Sir Alan, initiating Edward, now a tall and sensible boy, into many of them. The love she had formerly gained from pity among the people, was now hers as her right; and instead of withdrawing their healthy rosy children from the sad gaze of a bereaved mother, they rather brought them forward that she might bless them, even as she blessed the absent children of her heart.

Prissy lived on a bed of rose leaves, so happy was she, the almost constant companion of her darling May.

Meantime, what had become of Sir Robert Fane, Mrs. Trevor, and Miss Flower—those three celebrated conspirators?

Sir Robert was experiencing the fate of all those who, lending themselves to one little deceit, tumble down headlong into a whole pit of disagreeables.

None of his various journeys, none of his great successes, none of his jovial meetings, had been attended with pleasure

unalloyed. Some little vexation poisoned his best book—some trifle worried his happiest moments; he began to think he was doomed to be miserable; yet his finances were in a flourishing condition—absolutely he was laying by money. Let him just double what he had already gained, and then—then Marion's turn should come. Not but that Marion had rather disappointed him, she had so apathetically sunk into quiet submission—after all, her character was a weak one. Why need he trouble himself about a person who appeared perfectly contented? Here a twinge arrested him; he saw that hopeless, faded face looking up at him out of the bottom of his wine-glass. He looked away angrily—there it was above the lamp—now peeping out behind the screen—everywhere.

“Well, certainly she had looked miserable; how was it possible she could make herself so pitiable a sight that he could not bear the remembrance of her, and yet live on?” He shuddered at the wickedness of this thought, and drove it away peremptorily. “He ought to go and see his son this Christmas, but really he had so foolish and tender a heart, that just as he was getting over the last sight of her, he would be worrying himself to death again with a fresh one. He would write a kind letter instead, and send for Edward to come and see him for a day or two. Then he would be able to learn from him if she was still so wretched, so woe-begone.”

Edward came, and was as contented as his father that the visit should be a short one. He hated being away from his Aunt Marion during these his first holidays, while Sir Robert could not look into his blooming face, witness his gentlemanly, intelligent manners, and hear all his boyish happiness, without pangs that he could only compare to a mental fit of the gout.

He gathered, too, that she had no intention of dying—she was never better; she must be very active, she must be wonderfully busy, if all Edward said was true. He might go and look at her without any qualm. So at Easter he promised his boy a long visit at Asheton Court, and they parted mutually pleased.

As for the Trevors, they remained three months at Pau. Then (Fortune's blindness is lucky for some people) an old, much-despised, because hard-working, relation of Mr. Trevor's died, and left the two little mild Miss Trevors his heiresses.

At first it was supposed this was a doubtful good; but when the fact became known, that, owing to his business-like habits, which had brought on him the high displeasure of Mrs. Trevor, and the ultimate dropping of his acquaintance, he was the

owner of that sum called a plum, besides a Cornish mine of much greater value than that belonging to Mr. Trevor, wonderful was the commotion.

Instantly the Miss Trevors were elevated into a position, by their clever mamma, that was more honourable than pleasurable. But at first this good fortune was rather vexatious to Mrs. Trevor than not; she hated the hard-working relation more than ever; why had he not left his money to Mr. Trevor, the proper heir? And if her daughters must have trustees, why not have appointed herself and Mr. Trevor? If she failed to answer these questions satisfactorily, the world did not. The laborious old gentleman had not earned money with care and frugality to bestow it upon two people, one of whom he despised, and the other despised him.

But this event brought all the Trevors home. The trustees were amiable and obliging, contrary to the usual habits of the race. They awarded the young heiresses very handsome allowances, on a scale commensurate with that station in life which is signified by being able "to drive your own carriage," not practically, but figuratively; and as they were yet too young to possess each a carriage and all its appurtenances, their mamma kindly made room for them in hers, and used the money in various other more appropriate ways. Further, these trustees were so obliging as to think it was useless leaving the bare walls of Trevor Castle unfinished; and, though it was not to be supposed that they would spend the whole of their lives together, yet the Miss Trevors required a home at once. It would be the easiest mode to finish Trevor Castle off-hand, and leave them to settle accounts for it when they came of age. So a portion of money was bestowed for finishing Trevor Castle, and in this delightful employment—in this rise from obscure foreign life to the elevated position of mother of two heiresses—Mrs. Trevor forgot her brother, his wife, his children, everything but what had to do with the Trevors.

As for Beatrice Flower, Fortune remembered her not—Time had forgotten her.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE DEATH OF SIR ALAN AND OF HIS DAUGHTER, LILY.

MARION expected Sir Alan and Lady Gordon to resume their summer lodgings about April, but she received a letter in February from Kythe, entreating her to come to them.

A sudden change had taken place in Alan. From being able, though suffering from fever and cough, to take part in all their pleasures and amusements, he had sunk, as it were in a week, into the state of a confirmed invalid.

Her sister's letter was hurried; and Marion could trace by the trembling characters that she was suffering in mind.

A few lines from Alan, written strong and firm as ever, yet prepared her for what was coming :—

“Come, my sister, my sweet counsellor, come to your Kythe. The time is arrived for you to take my place; and though I feel happy that she will be released, I know that without you she will suffer. Come, May, come soon, that I may lose nothing of my best gifts while I remain on earth.

“ALAN GORDON.”

Marion was indeed startled at the change; but as she averted her eyes from her sister's anxious look, that she might not read the sentence written therein, she yet thanked God for the calm and happy expression in her brother's face. Those mysterious, strange eyes had lost their wild gleam—that dreary look; and as she saw the serenity portrayed therein, she was struck by their being almost of one colour. The dark rim seemed merged into the blue pupil, and, but by a scrutinizing observer, their peculiarity would not have been noticed.

“I am to lose him,” said Kythe, looking calmly up into Marion's face, as they sat over the latter's fire, on the evening of her arrival.

“Yes,” said Marion, low and clear; “such is God's will.”

“He seems happy to go.”

“Let us thank God, sister.”

“For my long life, Marion, mourning him all the time.”

"For your long life, sister, thanking God for his release."

"It is so, May; and yet, now that I have you upon whom to lean, little fragile sister, my own strength has gone."

"This is natural, for you were overtaxed. But little Lily, she is changed also."

"No, I think not, May; she is pale, from being so much in her father's room; she is only good when with him."

"I noticed, sister, that the two colours in her eyes are most vivid, while Alan's are almost absorbed in each other. What does that mean?"

"She is very, very wild, dear May," said Kythe, evasively. "When her father, when he—ah, Marion!—when he goes, what shall I do with her? Kirke says he never saw any show such symptoms so young; and she hates him. She will not suffer him to come near her; without the slightest cause for so doing, she always calls him 'the mad people's keeper.' My Lily, my pretty Lily, is quite insane, without a lucid interval but when with her father."

There was no comfort to be gained in talking over this. But Marion set herself seriously to work to support her sister through her trials.

Many hours did she sit by the sick man's side, as he slowly sank into the grave. No unhappiness was there, nothing but peaceful content. He waited patiently for his summons. Sometimes they beguiled the hours, comparing their blessings and troubles; sometimes he poured forth his many wishes and hopes for the future welfare of those on earth whom he was soon only to watch from heaven.

In the eldest boy, he knew Kythe would have comfort and assistance, for he gave every promise of being all that the fondest parents could wish. The second girl was also equally a delight to them both. He made an ample provision for the poor little idiot; and many times he committed the youngest boy to Kirke's care, saying, "You are old, Kirke, and I am the third generation that have had to trust to you; but I leave my little son to your charge; you must educate a relation of your own to be to him what you have been to me."

But of Lily, the eldest girl, about whom mother and aunt were so anxious, whose age—the third in the family—might warrant her being cared for among the first, he never spoke.

At her sister's request, Marion asked him about her; the child was lying near him on the floor, all wet and dripping from having run into the brook, wild and uncontrollable; and

when entreated by both her mother and governess to change, she had refused in a burst of rage. Then, as they proceeded to do it by force, for she was almost as ill as her father, she had slipped from their fingers, and flying to her father's room, lay there panting and scowling, though silent.

"Kythe is anxious about little Lily, Alan,—see, she is all wet, she has been in the brook. Do, darling, let me take off your wet things."

"I won't," said the child.

"Remember how ill you are," remonstrated Marion.

"Lily, go and do as mamma wishes you," said her father.

The child rose and went out rapidly. "You have given no orders about Lily," said Marion, her voice trembling.

"There will be no need, May," he answered quietly.

Marion paused, and then said:—

"I mean, Alan, orders such as you have given me about Kythe and the other children."

"Still I say there is no need to do so, dear May."

"Perhaps you do not know that with you only is she good and quiet; beyond this room—"

"She is insane," interrupted her brother. "Can I not see the fatal sign, Marion. Nevertheless, be not troubled. God is merciful. Kythe has borne her share of the misfortunes of our family. The worst and maddest (for none ever were mad so young as this child) of all our race will not be left a sad bequest by me to her poor mother. My poor little Lily is provided for by her Father in heaven."

As he grew weaker, so did his beautiful spirit shine out more and more, until the mourning. Kythe could no longer weep. It seemed an ungrateful mockery towards God to wish to stay a soul so pure, so penitent, so anxious to be gone.

"Ah, Kythe, none of my race, marked as I am, ever before died thus, with loving eyes watching him, and he conscious thereof. I am blest indeed. You must remember this, sweet wife, that, had I lived much longer with the incurable wound on my mind of having injured you, I must have become permanently insane, and thus lost to you by worse than death. Our sister, our dear May, saved me from this. I was on the very verge when her sweet eyes returned my look of madness with one of sisterly love. Into those eyes I could look, knowing I had not injured them; their affection I could dwell upon, and it did me good to think she loved and trusted in a madman. I became sane from that very hour, May, and Kythe and I owe

to you this blessed parting, this sweet leavetaking. You must let Lily stay up to-night, my wife, I cannot spare her from my side."

"Thank you, Alan, for she is sadly ill and fretful. She is only quiet in your room, and has not slept for some nights."

"Lily, will you sleep?" said her father.

"Yes, papa; on your knee."

"Your father is too weak, Lily, come to me."

"No; I will not leave papa; the angels are in the room, they are watching to take him from me, if I let go my hold."

"I will not go without you, Lily," said her father; "so sleep once more on your mother's knee."

"Mamma, mamma," said the child, kissing and hanging about her with an affection she had not shown for months, "dear, sweet mamma, when papa and Lily go away, the evil spirit will leave her, and the two brightest stars in heaven will be us two, watching over and guarding you, looking down upon you all."

"My Lily is always good, when she likes," said her mother.

"No, mamma, I shall never be good here, so let me sleep once more in your arms."

For some hours Marion and Kythe sat silent and quiet by the dying bed of the husband and brother, the little girl sleeping as if exhausted, all the time. Then Alan woke, as with a start—

"Stay, stay," he cried, in half delirium, "my little child, I must have her. Lily! Lily!"

She awoke at his voice, and springing into his arms, now feebly stretched out, she said:—

"Good-bye, mamma, papa cannot go without his Lily."

"Kythe, Kythe, injured one—forgive, forgive."

Marion tried to lift the child from his clasp, that the poor wife might catch these last words, feel the last sigh of him whom she had loved so well, for whom she had borne so much. But they clasped each other closely. From which came those few gasps, each longer, fainter than the last—who breathed that low, faint sigh, neither Marion nor Kythe could tell.

"Alan, dearest, most loved, speak but one word to your Kythe."

The word came not.

"He is gone," she murmured, "or he would have replied. We must remove the child."

A cry from Marion startled her in that solemn moment. That clasp was death within death. The little child was dead in her dead father's arms. And thus were they buried.

CHAPTER LIX.

MARION HEARS NEWS OF HER CHILDREN, AND PRISSY ENCOUNTERS A GREAT DANGER.

LADY GORDON desired, as the greatest boon her sister could bestow on her, that she might be left in solitude for a few months. Trials such as hers had been, required time to restore the mind to its proper tone. The education of her two children would be employment sufficient to prevent her wholly dwelling upon her grief. Marion acquiesced, feeling that her decision might have been the same under similar circumstances; and, having extorted a promise that June should restore them again to each other, Lady Gordon coming south, Marion once more found herself at Asheton Court, a little before Easter.

"Dear May," was Prissy's greeting, "do you know that Beatrice is very ill, and mamma says she is in love? Think of that now; did you ever know anyone so stupid?"

"Oh, Prissy, don't you love me?"

"Oh, ho! don't you think to put me off that way; there are all sorts of love, and love for you is one of the best. Is Sir Robert coming soon?"

"Do you mean Beatrice is in love with Sir Robert?"

"My goodness, gracious! now, don't, May. I was not to tell any one, but mamma bid me find out from you if he was coming."

"Yes; he is to be here for ten days about Easter week, during Edward's holidays. Stephenson has already begun to air a room for him."

"I don't agree with mamma, May; of course, if he had been in love with Beatrice, he would have come long ago and proposed."

"Of course, Prissy."

"I suppose the next time you go to Scotland, I may go?"

"Yes, that is settled."

"Do you know that Julian is out, released? He has left the asylum."

"Has he, poor fellow. I never thought him mad, only perverted, Prissy. Some one persuaded him to all he did."

"Some gentleman from Italy went to see him, and answered for his sanity. Julian is so grateful. He has been to see us."

"I hope you were kind to him."

"Yes, very; only think, Beatrice would not see him; she went off to Miss Walker's, and there she means to stay, until he leaves for Italy—her own cousin!"

A pause—

"Julian wants to see you."

"I shall be very glad to see him; where is he?"

"Down at Maxwell's lodgings, with this gentleman—such a nice old gentleman."

"I shall be on the sands this evening; tell him to come to me then."

Time and incarceration had done wonders for Count Julian; and if the fairness of Marion's appearance was all the more striking from the blackness of her dress, he resolutely kept his feelings under control.

"I wished to see you, to bid you farewell; I have had much of England—too much. I have been deceived, and was told you loved me, Mrs. Asheton; this gentleman, my preserver, my mentor, my wise friend, has proved to me how wrong I have been. Pure, cold, English girl, one who ought to have been my best friend deceived me, led me on—brought me to this disaster. I am not mad, I was not ever mad; but when I was advised that you were ill-used, neglected, forsaken, as a man I was all of rage."

"That is sufficient, count—need we say more?"

"Yes, one little more. I was told, in that my mad act of coming to Madam Asheton, that the divorce is of easy make to English people now—that Mr. Asheton was anxious for that, because he love my cousin Beatrice."

"Sir," exclaimed Marion, "who belied Mr. Asheton thus?"

"Madam," said the count's stranger friend, coming forward, "it was very well known abroad that Mr. Asheton consulted Miss Flower upon all matters concerning his children, and rumour declared his wife to be insane—"

"Pardon me, sir, you are a stranger to both Mr. Asheton and myself—"

"No, no—not to Mr. Asheton—"

"Sir, sir, did you see—did you know my children?" And with her whole face in a glow, her hands extended in earnest entreaty, Marion bent forward with a pitiful beseeching in her face.

"The very attitude! God love you, my dear, sweet girl—I know them quite well, and love them as if they were my own."

"Oh, you dear, nice old man," exclaimed Prissy, laughing and crying at once, and feeling strongly inclined to pat him on the back.

"Not so old either, ma'am," answered he, smiling. Both he and Prissy were willing to let the little mother recover herself.

But she could not speak at once. She took his hands in her own and clasped them.

"Yes," he said, as an answer, "they have touched them often, stroked their pretty hair. They have forgotten their mother, I fear, that you must expect, all but Rupert. I can warrant he remembers you."

"Thank you, sir," said Marion, simply.

It was all she could say for the present. The large tears ran down his own face.

Prissy kept on unconsciously saying—

"Oh, you nice, dear man!"

Suddenly, as if a thought struck her, Marion calmed herself, and said:—

"Sir, as you know Mr. Asheton, you can tell the count his aspersion is false."

"True, my dear; pray excuse me—but he leaves you."

"That may be, sir; but when the sea is dry, you may think that of Mr. Asheton which he says."

"Don't, don't, my dear, sweet lady, look like that. If ever there was an honourable, upright, ridiculous fool of a man, it is Mr. Asheton, and the count knows it too."

"Just my opinion," chimed in Prissy, blowing her nose violently in corroboration.

"Enough," said Marion, with that stateliness which sat so gracefully on her slight figure.

"The count returns with me to Italy; we are going to see Mr. Asheton," continued the unknown; "he has been deceived too."

"Sir," said Marion, coldly; "Mr. Asheton is not likely to be

unjust. Even though he may not be prudent in his wishes regarding his children, he judges their mother as he would himself, sir. Are my children merry, sir?"

The hardest heart must have melted at the innocent love and earnestness with which Marion plied the stranger with questions regarding those so long lost to her, while he was reduced to as violent a state of nose-blowing as Prissy.

As Count Julian gazed on this scene, he dismissed at once from his heart the fatal idea, fostered by evil minds, that Marion had ever returned his affection. The rough hands, the broad, deeply pitted, weather-beaten face of his friend were far more lovely in her eyes than all the count's beauty and perfections—merely because he had seen her children.

Divine as might be the sentiment, it was not a feeling to which he could in the least respond. He felt that Prissy's heart was much more tender and lovable.

"I should like very much to see Asheton Court, if I might," said the stranger; "to-morrow we go to visit that Miss Beatrice, who has fled from us. I have some other business that will detain me in England a week or ten days; after that, dear young lady, if you have any little gifts, messages, or words for your children, make me the bearer of them."

"You will discover their father's wishes first, before you give them, sir," continued Marion, all in a glow to think the impenetrable barrier that appeared to separate her from her children, as death might have done, could happily be lifted up, if but for a moment.

He promised. Marion, too much excited to say more, went home and delighted the heart of Stephenson, and, through her, all the rest of the household, by the news of having spoken to a gentleman who knew her children well.

What pretty presents she prepared for them! What tender little letters she wrote to them!—so gently worded, that their father would be unable to find even a thought that would war against his sensitiveness.

Prissy, early the next morning, took the unknown over the whole house and all the gardens, and he was as indefatigable in visiting every hole and corner as she was in showing them. He asked permission to see Marion once more, kissing her hand, upon leave given, with the air of a devotee to his saint. Then, as he departed with the count for the abode of the Lady Superior (they intended taking Beatrice by surprise), he did the same by the amiable Prissy, only after a gallant fashion.

"The very nicest man, May, you ever saw; far better than your counts or Sir Roberts, or anything of that sort. If he loved a woman, he would say so at once; and only think, May, he is but forty-six years old. I took him quite for fifty—didn't you?"

CHAPTER LX.

MRS. FLOWER TRIES HER TALENTS AT MATCH-MAKING, AND LIGHTS A SPARK, BUT NOT THE ONE SHE INTENDED.

SIR ROBERT came. Marion was surprised at the change in him. When people don't keep their hearts bright and pure, the eyes and the countenance partake of the darkness within. He was much aged, and he was surprised in his turn at the difference in Marion. Not only surprised, but indignant; she had no business to look so well—to look as if she might live to be a centenarian. Stephenson being an old friend of his, he went to gossip out his thoughts to her warily, so that he might gain a vast lot in return.

"Yes, truly," remarked Stephenson, "it was delightful to see the young madam, and what good she was doing. Up at six every morning, and never idle from morning till night, Sir Robert."

"I suppose she has lost all feeling then, and ceases to care for the children?"

"Oh, dear goodness, no, Sir Robert; not a week ago, sir, a gentleman came here, who had seen Mr. Asheton and the children—"

"A man marked with small-pox, weather-beaten, Courtenay by name, looking much older than he is—"

"I don't know his name, Sir Robert," answered Stephenson, all on the prim, from the vehemence with which Sir Robert spoke; "but probably Miss Prissy does."

"Very good, go on. I was just surprised; that was all."

But Stephenson had her misgivings about that surprise; it was not a pleasant one. Besides, Sir Robert's countenance was not now capable of being masked over; the lines were too strong, the habitual thought of his heart was stamped on it

visibly, and it was evidently a very unpleasing, not to say bad, thought.

However, she talked on, and when he had got as much out of her as he wished, he departed in search of Prissy.

"The nicest man that ever was; but as to thinking what his name was, indeed Prissy never thought it a bit necessary."

Thoughtfully Sir Robert pursued his way to the Wood-head the next day, if haply he might find Miss Flower alone.

On the alert, vigilant and expectant, he met Mrs. Flower. She had heard of his arrival, and had been in the fidgets ever since.

"Mrs. Flower well, Mrs. Flower he saw blooming as ever, was sorry to hear Miss Flower was not so well—called to inquire after her health; hoped he might be considered an old friend, and that she would vouchsafe to see him."

Mrs. Flower's head spun round with ecstasy, but giving herself a severe pinch to call herself to order, at which in the simplicity of her heart she was nearly shrieking out, and, at all events, made an unamiable face, when she was feeling quite the reverse, she gave him to understand Beatrice would be delighted to see him—she was sitting in the garden. Mrs. Flower was rather busy herself, in fact, had an especial appointment with Sarah Jones about flannel waistcoats, for Samuel Jones was cruelly distracted with rheumatism; but whatever happened, Sir Robert must remain till she returned.

He half promised, and off she went. But, oh, that anyone should have to record of innocent, simple Mrs. Flower, that she was a deep designer, the hatcher of a plot, in which she was not only the hen that laid the egg, but the chicken that was to be developed. She was the very plot itself.

A seat had been designed by herself, and given up to Beatrice as her seat. It was on the cliff, yet so situated that, whatever was said in it, the words rose up in clear distinctness to that oriel window aforetime mentioned, which, in an earlier part of this history, was adorned with chintz curtains, gaily scattered over with cabbage roses and trellis bars. Those beautiful curtains were now deposed, and doing duty in the window above, their higher elevation betokening a lower lot, while stone-coloured moreen, elegantly bound with yellow worsted binding, now shaded the oriel window.

For some weeks past, that deep, designing Mrs. Flower had insisted upon the concoction of those admirable sermons taking place within the oriel window. All unknown to himself, Mr.

Flower was taking a part in his wife's plot, the exact reverse of what he really would have done had he known it. But she had her private ideas of Sir Robert. If he had been playing with the feelings of Beatrice, at all events some ears, and those the most proper ones, her own father's, should hear of it, and then be able to bring the base deceiver to book. About this last fact, Mrs. Flower was not very sanguine. It was more than probable her Constant would remain quiescent, rather than act the indignant father. But matters had prospered so happily, so quickly as yet, she stumped away to the village in full persuasion that, on her return home, she should find an interesting tableau ready for her, to rush in and take her share.

Good Mr. Flower certainly would never have acted the part of eavesdropper intentionally. He heard voices, but he the more readily devoted himself to his sermon, that he might shut out the sense of them. He succeeded in doing so for some time, but a loud and impassioned exclamation, uttered in a voice that bore a terrible resemblance to one heard long ago, and which made him turn cold as he thought of it, roused him.

"I hate her, I have told you I hate her. This man, who forced himself into my presence with Julian, has been sent by Mr. Asheton to detect or unravel any mystery. Here is Mrs. Trevor's letter, he has been to her, though, of course, she cares little now whether Mr. Asheton returns home or not. But he shall not, he shall not, while I live. Have you no spirit in you, Sir Robert, that you can think of nothing to keep them still apart?"

Up to this moment Mr. Flower had listened involuntarily, and with a puzzled air. Gradually, his handsome but rather stolid face assumed as many expressions as if he had the apparatus of dissolving views in his head. First, horror, then delight—disgust—hope—indignant anger—devout gratitude. Lastly, a deep shame fell upon him, and he sat down, his hands covering his face.

Popping about the village, as if her legs were entirely made of cork, in and out of every house, not only to pass away the time, but to occupy her excited feelings, Mrs. Flower danced merrily home, after what she considered a fit and proper time had elapsed. Now for the tableau.

Cautiously opening the drawing-room door, in case the parties performing the tableau were not all arranged as they might wish to be, she peeped in. Excepting the kitten, there were no

actors. What could the kitten be playing with? Surely—yes, too surely, it was Constant's own peculiar ink-bottle.

How is it that, when things are upset, the ink-bottle is sure to thrust itself into the mess, overturn itself in the most inconvenient and conspicuous spot in the room? What an indelible black mark there was on the new piece of drugget, just where it joined the carpet. You could not look into the oriel window without seeing it. And the kitten had pranced in and out of the murky pond, evidently bent on discovering the source of so wonderful a thing, and had printed unconsciously, and without studying effect, her little foot-marks, all over the room, on the chairs, along the sofa, even up on the table-cloth, which in carelessness, easy households, is sometimes left from breakfast, ready laid to do duty for dinner.

But the sermon. Mrs. Flower frantically rushed forward to save the loose sheets of paper scattered in dangerous proximity to the ink pond. Fortunately, there did not appear much of it written.

Mrs. Flower calmed herself under the most provoking trial of domestic life (which the upsetting of ink is, there being no possibility of washing out the stain and remembrance together), because, of course, the accident had been the effect of some startling event. Banishing the kitten, collecting the precious papers, ordering hot water and soap, Mrs. Flower, leaving matters in a train to mend, proceeded to the garden. No one there, she rummaged the house; at last she did what would have been her wisest course at first—she asked the servant for news of her master.

"Master left a message for you, ma'am;—you wasn't to wait dinner. He was gone on business to N——, and meant to call on Dr. Ford, and wouldn't be home perhaps till tea."

Utterly confounded by a line of conduct deviating in the wildest manner from anything that he had ever done before, during the twenty-three years she had known him, Mrs. Flower forgot all about the tableau and the actors therein.

She felt like a sleep-walker, and in her comatose state, dabbled her fingers into the ink stains, on the tablecloth (whose turn had not come to be looked after) and unconsciously enlarged and added to them. Nothing but its being twitched violently from her grasp, by the indignant servant, roused her.

CHAPTER LXI.

HOW THE FLOWERS ENJOYED TRAVELLING.

SAD as was the condition of Mrs. Flower when last we mentioned her, she was, now that we see her again, in a much more pitiable plight. And many kind, experienced people will pity her, if they have endured what she was now enduring, the miseries of a passage from London to Ostend, with a chopping sea and an adverse wind.

She and Prissy both declare they did die that very night, though how they came to life again, they are incompetent to tell.

But the miseries of that their first night at sea, faded before the realities of a land journey in a foreign country.

Both Mr. Flower and Beatrice were with them; indeed, it was on account of Beatrice that they had left home so suddenly, Dr. Ford having advised her instant removal to her native land. Yet, as Mr. Flower did not appear under any very great anxiety about her, even consenting to her own wish that she should remain with some friends at Pau, while they left her, and went on to Italy, it is to be supposed he could plot as well as his wife.

As long as Beatrice was of their party, they managed very well; she knew everything, language and money. But when she was left behind, and they had to depend upon the little that Mr. Flower remembered, their state resembled that of Esquimaux put down suddenly in the heart of London.

What Mr. Flower did know was smothered in the running English commentary that Mrs. Flower and Prissy kept up upon every state of perplexity into which they fell.

"Don't believe them, Constant, whatever they may say. Look into our boxes, indeed, what will they want next, the inquisitive, mean things. We have as good things in our boxes as anyone, I am sure."

"Oh, papa, don't let that man come near you; I am sure he is a bandit. What can he mean grinning at me, and what's that he's saying? 'Spak Inglis,' what does he mean? Tell him, papa, I won't have him grin so—where are the police?"

"Oh, Constant, Constant, why did you bring us to such a horrible country?"

"My dear Sophy, be reasonable. It is absolutely necessary we travel about until I can find Mr. Asheton. While I have been flattering myself I was doing my duty, a terrible crime has been perpetrated under my very eyes, one of the actors in it being a member of my own household. I take bitter shame to myself, that I did not (as became me, her nearest male relative) exert myself to know why Mr. Asheton left our pretty May so cruelly. I, sinfully indolent, concluded he had always intended to leave her, because of that clause in the settlements. But my daughter Beatrice (alas! too like her mother), that gambling, needy Sir Robert Fane, and, I fear, Mrs. Trevor, have together been the sole cause that he did not return home. I cared not to tell you this before, lest you might, in a heedless moment, suffer some words to slip, by which Sir Robert would take alarm. And, above all, I did not wish Beatrice to know. As the best amends I could make my poor Marion, I went instantly to N——, and engaged a clergyman to do my work for an indefinite period. I told Dr. Ford partly the truth, and he, to assist me, ordered Beatrice to Italy. I had, as you know, often talked of going once more to Rome, and taking you and Prissy. This appeared to me the most natural thing to do; besides, I should require your testimony to add to mine, in regard to proving our Marion's perfect innocence. I should like to have brought Stephenson for the same purpose, but I feared not only to excite suspicion, but hope, in Marion's heart. Therefore aid me, my dear wife, in repairing a great wrong; and do you, Prissy, exert yourself. I do not intend to return home until I have found Mr. Asheton."

"Goodness, gracious me! if I travel in this horrible country all my life, neither will I."

But Mrs. Flower could not speak. She must put her thoughts into something like intelligible order ere she could venture to give voice to the vast volume of chaotic ideas that floated through her brain, raised by her husband's words.

Many more miseries did they endure; but while she was almost unconscious of them, Prissy bore them with unflinching zeal, nay, with a stern sort of martyr-like joy—would she not have full revenge when Mr. Asheton was before her? But human endurance has a limit.

Knowing that Mr. Asheton had sent his last bulletin of the children from La Spezzia, as a quicker and more convenient

mode of travelling, Mr. Flower decided to go there by sea. A small, crazy, old coasting steamer offering itself, and believing the report of the captain, that she was old only in paint, but perfectly new in other respects, the amiable Flower family decided to trust themselves within her. Mrs. Flower's bones ached so terribly from the long, slow, night-and-day journeys of foreign railways, that she looked forward with pleasure to being quiet, cool, and unshaken on the bosom of that liquid sapphire sea. Thirty hours of fresh sea air, and the power of walking ten steps to and fro at any moment they chose—there was a luxury in the very thought.

But the fresh air was not sufficiently fresh to drive away the combined smells of train oil, bilge water, and frying onions, which piece of cookery was going on always.

Also the engine panted, puffed, groaned, squealed, so like suffering humanity, that Mrs. Flower was alternately indignant and alarmed. However, it was only for thirty hours; Prissy became paler and more pale; the odours were too many for her. To have gone below would have put an end to her at once.

Mrs. Flower at last succumbed altogether. This quiet, calm blue sea was as treacherous to her internal economy as the angry channel between England and Belgium. Mr. Flower was very uneasy, mentally as well as bodily. New vessels did not require such incessant pumping. Forty hours passed, for the last ten of which they had been almost stationary. The fuel was expended. The idle, indolent, strongly-scented crew at last bethought themselves of putting up a sail, to catch the breath of wind that was flying about in little whiffs like a baby's laugh. Mr. Flower went to look over their store of food provided for thirty hours. It was considerably diminished. He could have eaten it all himself at one meal. Sixty hours went by. They approached a reedy, low shore, with a fishing village near. The evening set in dark, with heavy round clouds rolling up, shouldering each other with ominous impatience. Mr. Flower wished to go ashore and buy food. He was told, if he went ashore, he must signal for a boat, and they further intimated there was no necessity for him to return.

"But I have paid my passage to La Spezzia."

"No doubt; the signor had done so; the signor was a just man."

"Then you must take me there."

"It was not good; the signor had better go at once. La Spezzia was far, very far—thirty hours."

"I insist upon being taken there."

"Ah, well, ah, well—if Our Lady pleased, they would get there sometime."

Heavily rolled the rotten old boat all that night. Angry seas were as common, if not more so, in the Mediterranean, as in British channels. Twenty times, and double that, did Mr. Flower regret he had not taken the captain's advice, disregarded the money paid, and gone on shore. As the day dawned, Mrs. Flower was only capable of saying, "Take me home, take me home." Prissy was nearly as bad; and Mr. Flower was ravenously hungry, as well as anxious, and they had not one morsel of food left.

"Where are we now?"

"Ah, bah! there La Spezzia. Thirty hours beating up—bad wind."

"Then we must land."

"Ah, bah! the signor had reason now, but he must wait. Our Lady must blow them nearer shore."

It was not until four o'clock that our unhappy travellers found themselves once more on land, and even then they could not felicitate themselves much. They were surrounded by a crowd of staring people, half naked, indeed, the children wholly so, to Mrs. Flower's horror and Prissy's shock. As for regarding Mr. Flower's entreaties for something to eat, until they had had ample time to investigate every minutia regarding the party, his complaints were unheeded. Slowly, and by way of favour, one brought a water melon, another held up some fresh, earth-sprinkled garlic, a third handed a loaf of black bread, not so black as the hand that tendered it.

Sitting on their different packages, exposed to the unabashed gaze of an uncivilized multitude, the food given to allay their ravenous hunger (lucky it was ravenous), such as English dogs would have rejected, forlorn as to their present state, hopeless as to their future, the three poor Flowers sat, silent and miserable.

"Oh, oh, oh," the last Prissy enunciated with a sound approaching a scream; "my goodness, gracious me, can it be him? We are saved, we are saved; the very nicest, dearest, best man of the whole world."

And before them, in wonder as great as their misery, stood the unknown.

CHAPTER LXII.

MR. ASHETON ACKNOWLEDGES WITH PLEASURE THAT HE HAS AN
AUNT FLOWER.

MR. COURTENAY and Count Julian di Ramiano—there they were in full bodily presence. There was the carriage that had brought them, and in the distance might be descried coming, a very nice English carriage, with good, stout, English horses, and a bluff English-looking coachman. No one knew how it was accomplished, but in two hours from that time, Mr., Mrs., and Miss Flower were seated in a beautiful and spacious apartment, ornamented with every description of thing that could be made of white marble or alabaster, even to the very footstool, and partaking of a real English tea. And the nicest man in the world was making the tea, but not thinking he was making half enough of the unfortunate travellers.

An explanation had taken place between Mr. Flower and Mr. Courtenay, which at present showed no other fruit than an incessant shaking of hands, and laudatory epithets bestowed upon each other without stint.

“I was taking the count for the very purpose, it’s not a mile from here; we must go at once—that is, soon. The children will be in bed by nine. We will have it out with him this very night. Are the ladies equal?”

Equal! the ladies were insulted; and to prove their powers, they set off at once. Allowing for their exhilaration spending itself a little on the way, the two gentlemen waited for Mr. Flower, who had an Englishman’s habit of washing his hands and face, brushing his hair and coat, as preliminaries to any enterprise.

But like corks long bound down in ignominious slavery within the necks of bottles, Mrs. Flower and Prissy darted off with a spirit and an energy nothing could daunt. Had they endured perils of sea, of land, of men, to be baulked at the last moment of the prize for which they had borne so much. Rapidly plied their stout English feet down the shingly path, at the very notion. They could not mistake the way. This path

alone led to Mr. Asheton's villa. In vain the evening closed in with a soft beauty that lingered as if deeply loving the very scenes it created. Ungreeted was the moon rising with such saintly majesty over the dark blue trees, and lighting up their path with a clear radiance that might shame the day.

"It's lucky there's a moon," was all that matter-of-fact Prissy vouchsafed to say.

Mr. Asheton had kissed and blessed his children as they lay in their beds for the night. Then, in deference to a sort of restlessness that had lately wholly prevented him from sleeping until he had wearied himself almost to fainting, he was preparing himself for his nightly pacing to and fro from his own door to the desolate pine tree, when a familiar, yet long unheard, voice smote upon his ear.

"It is such a shocking thing, my dear, living amongst people who can't speak—that is, who can't speak English. It's all very well telling me that's a language, I'll never believe it; it's nothing but a clicking and a clacking of the jaws. It must be obstinacy. Now, I'll try him once more, as plain as I can say it. Tell Mr. Asheton Mrs. Flower wants to see him."

"My dear, dear Mrs. Flower, Aunt Flower, say, you come from my Marion?"

"Oh! you dreadful hard-hearted—oh! dear Mr. Asheton—yes, yes, of course I do—"

"The dearest, sweetest, most injured—"

"Constant is here, he will tell you all—"

"You have almost killed her—only she is getting better—"

"How could you believe such things—"

"You don't deserve her—"

This volley of words shot itself off at Mr. Asheton's head, in less time than it takes to tell.

Luckily the three gentlemen joined the scene of action. Whatever other hard words and bitter recoilings had been got ready to hurl at Mr. Asheton, they were all suddenly forgotten. Pity and kind feeling took their place. He indeed required both.

"Tell me no more," he said faintly, "I would hear no more—it is due to my wife."

"That is true," said Mr. Courtenay; "but (*sotto voce*) I'll make you hear what she said to me, of you, my friend, ere we die. I owe her that, the darling fair pet."

"Courtenay, help me; I would go now, at once. Oh! Aunt Flower, forgive me—pity me."

"Dear, dear, poor man—so altered too, quite old. Of course, nothing but forgiveness, love, and delight."

"All is ready, Mr. Asheton. My horses I detained, as I travelled to-day, at the different posts, promising them return fare, as we say in England. You cannot start until day dawns; then, I'll answer for it, no moment will be lost."

"Orders—I must give orders."

"No, no, rest; the ladies will do the packing, and see to get things ready. Remember, you have much before you. There is not such another wife in the world as yours, and you must try and get up your good looks, or she will not know you. Sit down, I have some good news to tell you about myself."

Mr. Asheton acquiesced, because he had not strength to argue. Mrs. Flower and Prissy went upstairs to give the necessary orders, and see them executed. And they were both extremely touched by the sad and tender look with which Mr. Asheton's eyes followed them out of the room. He was paying a sort of homage to the name of Flower.

They were not able to resist a peep at the children, May's children, whom she loved so fondly—had lost so long.

Rupert, lying back on his white pillow, looked, with his flushed cheeks, open mouth, and magnificent curls, one hand buried in them, like a young God of beauty; and if they did not admire the girls so much, it was because they saw him first. The fondest mother could not have beheld in her dreams a more beautiful image of a child to dote on than Rupert.

And when, disturbed by the vehemence with which they imagined they whispered their admiration, he awoke, and opened eyes exactly like Marion's, Prissy uttered a little shriek of delight.

Nothing daunted by this unexpected apparition, and this sudden disturbance of his sleep, the young gentleman raised himself on his elbow, and steadily gazed at them.

Evidently satisfied with his scrutiny, he held out his hand in amity, saying:—

"You are English people; I am glad to see you."

"And so are we to see you, you darling boy."

"Did you come from England to-night?"

"Yes; we have just arrived."

"Oh, madam, did you see?—have I a mother in England?"

"Yes, dearest Rupert, she is there waiting for you. You are going home to see her to-morrow."

With a passionate sob, he threw himself back, and boy-like,

he buried his face in the pillow, to hide his tears. In vain they tried to calm him, coax him, and make him look up—he only buried himself deeper in the clothes.

“Let us leave him, mamma; Mr. Asheton may be angry with us that we woke him at all; we have much to do.”

As they busied themselves in directing the servants what to get ready, and what to leave for less rapid conveyance, Prissy felt herself twitched by the sleeve. Turning sharply round, more from the effect a sudden surprise had on her nerves than from any other feeling, Prissy saw, wrapt in a sheet, the beautiful boy looking beseechingly at her, his eyelashes heavy with tear-drops.

“Ma’am, do you think my mother loves me?”

“That she does; she nearly died because you were taken from her.”

Mr. Courtenay at that moment appearing, to see how they were progressing, snatched the boy up in his arms, and kissing him, said:—

“Love you, my boy, never doubt it. Now mark my words; when you get to Asheton Court, in the garden you will come to a spot where there is a curious old yew tree cut into a round shape, as you think when you first see it, but there is a pathway through it, follow that, and then you will be answered as to your mother’s love.”

“Dear old Courtenay,” whispered the boy; “but I have been making something; I always meant it for my mother; it is in the studio of Felix.”

“I’ll go and fetch it; you shall take it home with you. Even though it’s now the middle of the night, I’ll rouse up Felix. Besides, they will all want to bid you farewell.”

There was no sleep that night at the villa, but for the two little girls. Though Rupert returned to bed, every time Prissy looked in at him, Marion’s eyes looked out, smiling and starlike.

“Bless the boy, what a darling he is!”

The Flowers were to be Mr. Courtenay’s guests, in order to recruit their nerves, and then, under his escort, were to return to England. His good news regarding himself consisted in his being appointed agent for Carrara marble in London. Consequently another consul was about to be sent by government to Carrara, and he was expected in ten days. Mr. Courtenay was well disposed to bestir himself in expediting matters. He was too stout an Englishman at heart to bear a long separation from his country, and though in pecuniary matters he was not much

the better, he desired no greater luck than being able to return there.

As for Prissy, when she came to know that they were to travel back to England under the escort of "the nicest man in the world," this journey (about which she and her mother had many misgivings they should never perform and survive) became quite a pleasant matter to think about.

Regarding Count Julian, Mr. Asheton steadily refused to hear one word of what they had all come such a long distance to tell him, showing his remorse and contrition by accepting the first syllable that dropped from Mrs. Flower's lips as proof sufficient. Thus, there was nothing to detain Count Julian. Grateful as Mr. Asheton showed himself, altered as he was, so as to excite the pity of Marion's nearest relations, the count regarded him with scarcely-concealed contempt. He disdained him, as fire might disdain any impugning of her power over frozen snow. But the count was not to return straight home; the bearer of a letter from her father, in which he blended horror of her unnatural conduct with the pity and forgiveness of both a Christian pastor and father, he was to go to Beatrice, and convey her to her Italian relatives, until, penitent and entreating, she should desire to return to the arms of those who loved her still, when all should be forgiven and forgotten.

It may be questioned, after that busy, sleepless night, who felt most happy, as, the carriage at the door, nothing more was to be done but to bid the travellers "God speed."

Some said it was Rupert; others said Mrs. Flower looked most radiant, and was the loudest in her expressions of joy. But there is a strong suspicion that Prissy and Mr. Courtenay ran neck and neck for it.



CHAPTER LXIII.

MARION FAINTS FOR THE LAST TIME.

It was the last day of May. Marion had been busy; she had never before been left entirely alone. Edward had returned to Eton, Sir Robert was gone, the Wood-head shut up. It is true she did not feel lonely, but she wondered, as she came from

beneath the arched yew tree—a spot she visited as often as she went into the garden—what she should do next. She stands there by the lake, just shut out from the sight of all the never-satisfied inhabitants of it by a large arbutus bush. Four years have nearly gone, and the fifth is slowly coming on, since her husband and children left Asheton Court.

When Mabel was born, six years before, Marion was a fair and beautiful matron—her step somewhat slow, her deportment that of blooming motherhood.

Fear, the realisation of those fears, began to reduce the bloom, to attenuate the rounded figure. But when her deepest grief came, like the withering frost upon autumn luxuriance, she faded and shrunk to the pale shadow of a Marion already dead in heart.

The change wrought by her sister's visit, and those varied events which had lately drawn her out of herself, vivified her heart once more. The healthy hue of life touched her cheeks with a delicate bloom, which only looked delicate because of the rich colour of her lips. Her eyes deepened in colour, from the radiance of a more contented spirit, were larger and more beautiful, while the elasticity of hope and health gave a spring to her step that reminded the spectator of the pretty girl stepping from cliff to cliff as she called to the flocks of pigeons. The matronly air and footfall were gone. Girlish and slight as her grief had made her, so she remained, looking scarcely older than when, as Prissy's little guardian angel and champion, she intruded herself upon the sacred arena of Mr. Godfrey Asheton's thoughts in her behalf.

"I shall amuse myself by writing to Kythe to-night—though I have no news to tell her, I can at least remind her that June has come."

"Father," said Rupert, as, arrived in England, they were rapidly travelling towards the mother he longed to see, "how soon shall we reach home?"

Mr. Asheton had been endeavouring, all the journey through, to proffer some explanation to his children regarding this strange and sudden journey. He had but short space now.

"Rupert, do you remember your home, Asheton Court, your mother?"

"My mother is very fair, with hair like Mabel's—eyes like mine. How soon shall I see my mother?"

"Is Asheton Court a palace, papa, of white marble, such as we shall be pleased to live in?" asked Issa.

"If we have a mamma," interrupted Mabel, "will she love us? Why has she left us so long?"

"She did not leave us, Mabel; I left her. The fault lies with me. Listen, children. I have been unjust to your mother. On discovering this, I have hurried home, as quickly as consideration for your health would permit. That I originally ever left her, was owing to you, my children. When we first married, she was very young, almost a child, she had received no education. I considered her childish. I may have been—I was unjust. But her simplicity and ignorance did not prevent her from being a very fond mother. As you grew older, I perceived that she had more influence with you than I had. Moreover, our opinions did not agree regarding your education; I wrung from her, most reluctantly, a consent that she would give you up into my entire charge for an indefinite period. But in my own mind, I concluded that time would be but a year. I anticipated that, at the end of a year, your mother and her influence would be wholly forgotten by you all. My anticipations were not verified in that time. You remembered and considered her as much as before. I concluded, against my secret warnings, to try another year. I loved you, my children." Rupert snatched his father's hand and kissed it, while Mabel threw herself vehemently into his arms. "I must have loved you, for I sacrificed my home, my country, your mother, for you."

"Father, I will never forget that. I wish I had been less troublesome to you." Mr. Asheton put his hand tenderly on his son's head.

"I soon discovered, Rupert, that I was as much mistaken in my plans for your welfare, as I had thought your childish mother. I meant to return home. But a rumour reached me;—I need say no more than that I wronged your mother—deeply."

"Father, you could not have loved her."

"Yes, I did, Rupert. When I left our home, when I parted from her, my hair was as black as yours."

Rupert reverently smoothed the silvered curls of his father's hair over his fingers, Mabel helping him.

"But how did you know it, father?"

"One whom I trusted—whom I thought a friend—told me."

"Oh, sir, and you believed anyone rather than our mother?"

"I did worse, Rupert. I never gave her the option of denying it."

The boy fell back into his seat, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"She will not love us. Our mother will be an angry woman. I shall never see the eyes that follow me in my dreams, she will not love the children of the man who doubted her. I would not."

"She will love us, she will love us, mamma, mamma," cried Mabel, her little face in a glow of happiness.

"Our mother must love us," said Issa; "we are her children, and have done her no wrong. I like the idea of having a mamma."

"Mother, my mother," whispered Rupert, as to himself.

"She will love you, Rupert. I wronged her once; never again can I doubt her affection. She is, she has always been, your fond, sorrowing mother."

"Is she pretty, papa; is she a mother of whom we shall be proud?" asked Issa.

"There was no one, when I left her, whom I ever thought fairer. But as I am changed, so may she be. Her trials have been sorer than mine."

"I think not, father," whispered Rupert, coaxingly. The sight of his father's emotion made him forget for a moment the thought that had brought such sudden tears to his eyes.

"I remember these gates. Father, tell me, surely this is home."

"It is." Agitated by the thoughts that crowded one upon another, Mr. Asheton's lips quivered, his eyes filled with tears. His father and mother came vividly to his mind; the old delight of his first feelings upon the birth of his own son—what had become of these? A pang came even then into his heart; he was not now to be, as heretofore, the first object, the only law-giver, to his children. Their mother would by right of her wrongs, if for no other reason, take the first, the higher place—he must be second. The sacrifice of the happiness of those four years had been made for nothing—and if she should be altered? If, associating only with her own family, uncontrolled by Asheton rules (say they were prejudices, still they were dear to him), she had become still more wedded to her own ideas, still further removed from the adoption of his, could he blame anyone but himself? No; he would have not only to bear it, but to sanction her orders. Failing in his own plans, could he in justice withhold from her the trial of those she advocated? Impossible. And then, only now did he remember no word

had been written to prepare her. It was Mr. Courtenay's wish.

"Take her by surprise, if you care to reward me for all I have done," he asked.

How would she receive him? She would be unlike the Marion of old, if she did not accept his penitence, and freely bestow his pardon. Yet it was somewhat bitter the draught he had to swallow. He must acknowledge himself wrong in everything, sinful in much—and this to the wife he had considered a child.

Then his home. Would it appear to be the same home in which he had so long dwelt with his parents? Would its state and order be unimpeachable?—his servants as Asheton servants always were?—or would all be altered? In that one moment Mr. Asheton felt the true value of a home. Was this to be evermore a haven of rest and comfort to him, or was it to be, from alterations, encroachments, or neglect, a never-ceasing punishment for his desertion of it?

The loud exclamations of his children roused him.

As if he had never left it, in well-remembered beauty, unchanged but in the fresh verdure that makes up in England for the want of a more sunny sky, every scene rose to his view.

The avenue of chesnuts appeared more luxuriant—the fresh young leaves glittered in the evening sunset with the drops of a sudden rain-shower. As if he had been daily there to see that it was done, broad, smooth, weedless, was the winding road along which they drove with that exhilarating rapidity, to which only English post-boys can urge their well-trained steeds; the sound of the quick trotting of the horses' feet, rising clear as one note, startling the quiet hinds, with their young fawns by their side, from beneath the sheltering trees.

As they emerged from the avenue, the well-known, broad, undulating lawn, almost more velvety, more smooth than he ever remembered it, rose before their sight, shaded and lighted as the grand old oaks, standing stately and alone, permitted the sun to pour its whole evening glory through them. And there in full, peaceful, symmetrical grandeur rose the beautiful home he had left. Not a sign of disorder, not a twig on the ground, not a leaf out of place—it was as if put in holiday trim by the agency of fingers scarcely mortal. A murmur of gratified pride burst from his lips, as he said:—

"Your home, my children."

In another moment they swept up to the Hall door. As of

old, ere the bell had ceased ringing, the door was widely opened; as had been the custom, the two footmen, in their blue and silver liveries and well powdered hair, advanced, the one to open the carriage-door, the other with his arm bent ready to hand them out; Mr. Payne, the butler, standing ready on the threshold step to welcome them in. It is true, he gave a hurried electrified start, and appeared about to descend lower than his dignity warranted; but the sight of Mr. Asheton acted as a charm. Without hurry, confusion, or further surprise, just as if they had been expected, Mr. Asheton and his children were ushered into their home; as Payne threw open the door of the great drawing-room with proper dignity, he bowed low, saying, with deference and respect:—

“Welcome home, sir; welcome home, Master Asheton and young ladies.”

His words were precise, his face stolid, but tears rained down it. He could not have uttered another sound to be made Mr. Asheton himself, or repressed that sudden shower of tears, were a kingdom the price.

Godfrey supported himself against the white marble mantelpiece; the carved angels that bore it up on either side seemed to lift their cold pale faces in pity upon him for four years lost and misspent, since he had seen them. As one after another each familiar object presented itself to his view, unaltered, as if he had scarcely been absent a day, a flood of remembrances overpowered him. Awed and bewildered, the children gazed upon him in silence.

Any moment the door might open, and standing before him he would see the being he had vowed to love and cherish; whom he did—had always loved—but had sacrificed to his caprice. How to meet her?—as a lord and master still to rule absolute—as a tender husband, after a long enforced absence—as a lover, fond, devoted?

The first he could not be.

The second he was hardly able to assume.

The third—was it possible he felt thus strongly, and yet would it not appear a mockery to her?

“Father,” asked Rupert, softly touching his arm; “where is my mother?”

“We will ask,” murmured Mr. Asheton, hoarsely.

Rupert rang the bell. Payne appeared at once, both eyes and nose reddened as if there were sharp frost on the other side of the door. Mr. Asheton could not command his voice to ask

the question he wished, but Payne appeared to understand him without.

"The young madam," said he, glancing at the clock, "will be at the lake in less than five minutes. She will be here, sir, almost as soon as I can send."

"Father, father, let me go to her; tell me the way—show me the path—I must go," exclaimed Rupert, impetuously.

Again the immovable face of the butler became the channel of another shower of tears, while, unable to speak, he pointed mechanically to the two footmen, bringing in trays of cake and wine.

"We will all go," said Mr. Asheton.

"You must, sir, Mr. Asheton"—this had reference to a glass of wine, poured out by Payne, and thrust respectfully, but peremptorily, upon Mr. Asheton: he swallowed it—his lips were white. He looked at his faithful old servant mutely. He understood the question Mr. Asheton had not voice to ask.

"By the cedar walk, sir, through the garden. A little gate, Mr. Asheton, leads through a small wood to the lake."

"Thank you;—you're a good old fellow, shake hands."

"Dinner at seven, Mr. Asheton," he just managed to say, in a voice that appeared to come out of a wet sponge.

Mr. Asheton bowed an assent. Rupert was already gone. But he turned back more than once to assure himself that his impatient steps had not borne him in a wrong direction. Then, arriving at the wicket-gate, and seeing the lake gleaming through the trees, he bounded on, and disappeared from their sight.

"Will mamma love me," whispered Mabel, her little heart beating.

"Of course," answered Issa, aloud; "why should she not?"

No more was said. In a minute Rupert was seen returning.

"Father, there is a young lady standing there, just by the arbutus bush, dressed in black. May I ask her if she has seen my mother near here?"

Mr. Asheton was about to answer, when the sudden rush of water from all parts of the lake filled the quiet air with innumerable sounds. Above their heads rose the soft gurgle of the ringdoves, and the chirping of smaller birds, blending with the loud cackle of the ducks, and the trumpet note of Canadian geese. But above all, clear and sweet, was the sound of a woman's voice calling the birds to her. As they looked through the trees, they all saw the lady of whom Rupert must have

spoken; she was scattering food to her feathered *protégés*; but on her shoulders, on her broad white hat, on her hands, nestled the doves, and the song birds of every sort. Mr. Asheton held his children back. Very pretty was it to see her graceful dalliance with these feathered favourites. But it was not for long. Emptying her basket among them, and casting up her arms, suddenly she appeared to bid them leave her and eat. In a moment the air, so lately sounding with many notes, was silent.

"Now, father?" He ran without waiting for the assent.

"Madam," they heard him asking her, "have you seen Mrs. Asheton?"

She looked at the boy, saying, in a voice that made Mr. Asheton's heart beat:—

"Who wants her? She does not see strangers."

"I want her, madam, and my father: we are not strangers."

Godfrey could see the colour rising in her face—he could see her hand move as if feeling for a support.

"Oh, madam, speak—if you only knew how I want Mrs. Asheton!"

The conviction that it was her child who addressed her soon dawned upon her mind. The basket dropped from her other hand, her eyes grew larger, wondering, yet fearful; she touched the boy, his hands, his cheeks, as if she doubted that he was a living, breathing object before her. She parted the hair from his brow, looking down into eyes she saw were the image of his own. The boy trembled beneath the light touch of her fingers, and the tears filled his eyes, as he said:—

"Lady, I want my mother."

"Mother," echoed the sweet lips, with a low sighing sound; "he wants his mother, and I want my boy, my Rupert."

Mr. Asheton caught her, as she fell, white and insensible.

"Water, water—oh, bring water!" exclaimed Godfrey in agony. Unfastening the large straw hat, he lifted from the fair brow those lovely, never-forgotten curls.

Rupert dipped his handkerchief in the lake.

Many sighs came from the fluttering heart as the water was sprinkled on her face.

"But, my mother, sir?" said Rupert.

"This is your mother; this is my Marion—my wife. Oh! look up, love—speak to me, pity me, pardon me."

Kissing her curls, her hands and face, with passionate kisses, Godfrey Asheton forgot himself, and all around him but the form he held in his arms.

Filling his hat hastily with water, Rupert placed it by his father. Then, taking the hands of his sisters, he drew them aside.

"When she recovers, she must see no one but our father. He will have something to say to her we ought not to hear. See, I believe this is the very yew-tree of which old Courtenay told me something. Within it, he said, we should see if our mother loved us. Let us look within, sisters; we can hear if we are called, and we shall yet be out of the way."

In a sort of silent awe, they passed within the yew-tree, Rupert giving one glance back at his mother.

The path led to a small round enclosure, encircled first by a closely-clipped hedge of the common larch, just now dressed in the freshest green. At certain distances, also in a circle, were placed pyramids of rose-trees beginning to bud.

Within this last circle appeared to be the pattern of something strange, closely-clipped, low on the ground.

As Rupert studied it, he smiled in gladness.

"See, sisters, this is our mother's garden. Here she sits every day; and do you not see what is growing there out of the ground? Stand on the seat, Mabel, and you will see better."

"There is my name," cried the little one, "my very own name, planted in the garden."

"And mine and Rupert's," exclaimed Issa; "but what is this?"

These are the words that the children discovered growing in their mother's garden:—

keep them.	May God	bless them,
	RUPERT.	
	ISOBEL.	
	MABEL.	
	love them,	

"But was that really our mother?" said Issa. "She looked so young—so pretty."

"Our father must know. Oh! mother, mother, make haste and kiss me. I shall not think it is you, until I hear you say, Rupert, my Rupert, once more. But I know it is my mother, I remember her. She is not altered—she is as we left her."

As this scene was passing between the children, their father watched consciousness gradually returning to Marion's heart.

Tears, drawn by acute sensitiveness, forced themselves from

between her closed eyelids. A few sobs, and the words, "my children," could just be heard.

"They are here—near you—within call, Marion."

She strove to put her feeble hands together.

"Oh, God, I thank thee!" she murmured.

"Can you forgive me, Marion—my wife? Will you hear my pleading—my justification?"

Her eyes unclosed, and looked upon him as he bent over her in deep anxiety. Like clouds in the summer sky, various feelings flitted over her face.

"My children," she asked clearly.

"Shall never again be parted from you, but at your own wish."

This time the hands were closely clasped together, the eyelids drooped, the lips moved, Godfrey felt she must thank God once more ere she thought of him.

Sunny was their light when she again opened her eyes; her lips were resuming their usual colour. She was strong enough to rise from his arms.

"Thank you, I am well now; it is the sudden shock. Where are they?"

"I will call them soon, dearest; but, I beseech you, hear me first. I want your pardon; I was deceived."

"Nay, say no more, you were deceived; now you know the truth. That is enough."

"But your forgiveness, Marion."

"Take it. Let me see my children."

Godfrey was troubled. Was this real magnanimity, that accorded his pardon ere she heard the sin? Or was it childishness, that cared not, so she had her own way? Or, was it—indifference?"

As if guessing his thought, Marion said:—

"If you have been unjust to me, you suffer more than I do. Why pain you by confessing that which would wound me to hear. If my forgiveness is necessary, it is wholly yours. Let me kiss my children." Godfrey felt something like a shiver at his heart. Where was the tender, the loving Marion? He had thought to receive and give the tokens of love and reconciliation. But she had already withdrawn from his grasp, and had risen, steadying her yet trembling frame by the branches of the arbutus tree. As she stood up, the air again resounded with the noise of the water-fowl.

"Take me to them," she pleaded.

With a strange joy, inexplicable to himself, he again threw

his arms round her, and supported her to the yew-tree, where Rupert stood eagerly waiting; but it was even with a jealous pang he perceived she was still the fond Marion, the loving, idolising mother.

Exquisite was the picture of that happy restoration. The mutual exchange of never-ending kisses—the fond epithets—the loving touches—the tender gazing—the mother's movements, so beautiful, so natural—the children's, so touching, so innocent—their open comments of admiration, causing soft blushes to arise in her face, half shame, half pleasure. Many years had Godfrey Asheton been in search of the beautiful in both Art and Nature. Here, in his half-despised wife, in his own home, he witnessed a sight that nothing in Italy could equal in beauty—nothing in Art had ever surpassed.



CHAPTER LXIV.

SIR ROBERT FANE MAKES HIS LAST BETTING-BOOK.

"HEAVEN and earth! what is this? Do I dream? Am I mad? What shall I do? What a thorough villain, ass, knave, I have been in the whole of this business! Let me read again—

"MY DEAR ROBERT,—I understand from Miss Flower that a gentleman, employed, I suppose by my brother (very properly, too), to investigate that very old story you and she told Godfrey of his wife, has been to see you, as well as myself. Of course I gave him every information I could, and lamented with him upon the sad way in which my poor brother had been duped. If you remember, he would take no advice from any of us. However, the visit of this Mr. Courtenay will have prepared you to learn that my brother, satisfied by his report, has returned home, and is, I am thankful to say, once more in his proper sphere. I have not heard from him yet (though I have written to congratulate him), for of course he must have much to engage his attention. We were not absent from home above two years and a half, yet I can assure you everything was in the greatest disorder. I have delayed offering assistance to my

brother in the task of restoring Asheton Court once more to what it used to be, because, in truth, Trevor and I have scarcely a moment to ourselves. The vast responsibilities devolved upon us by the charge of our young heiresses, oblige us to be selfish.'"

Here two columns of Mrs. Trevor's letter were occupied by a dissertation on what was due to these amiable young creatures, which, read by a stranger, might have been considered descriptive of some wonderful young princesses.

"Finally:

"However, no more on this interesting, absorbing topic. As the husband of my valued lost sister, I have considered it right to let you know of my brother's return, and aware that your unfortunate share in that business must now be clear to him, it would be well for you to keep out of his way. As one of his dearest relations, I must decline having any further intercourse with you until I learn from my brother what his wishes are. Should he decide that you are not to be regarded further by our family, pray accept my adieus at once. On the contrary, if he thinks it well that 'bygones should be bygones,' I will take care that, when we meet, nothing on my part shall remind you of the disagreeable past.

"Yours, &c., &c.,

"ELLINOR TREVOR.

"P.S.—As of course your son will be returned on your hands, I am justified, I think (being my only sister's only son), in offering him a home and a mother's care, whenever you may find it expedient, on the distinct understanding that he is not to associate with my daughters. Their trustees might blame me for any indiscriminate introductions.'"

Mrs. Trevor unconsciously overshot her mark, which, it is presumed, was to frighten Sir Robert out of the way of any real explanation. Though smitten with remorse, he would not have withdrawn himself from Mr. Asheton's reach through fear. He would have waited his summons, if he intended sending one; and, to do him justice, man of the world as he was, he began to feel happier than he had been for months. The disgrace of a lie was not exactly removed from him, but, at all events, the mischief he had created was repaired, or in the way of being so. He had begun to hate Marion for being well and contented. He preferred her other unhappy state much more—because that touched him. A moment of remorse and good-

ness, and he might have repented, and atoned to her. The blooming active Marion grated against him in every way.

But Mrs. Trevor's letter. He wished every single word within it had been as alive in flesh and blood as it was in sting, that he might have scorched, tormented, branded, annihilated it.

More in a sort of mad attempt to disappoint or crush her than in the healthy penitence that would have better become him, he sat down, yet smarting, and wrote a full confession of the whole transaction to his brother-in-law. He exaggerated the facts, he coloured their deeds, he damned himself, for little other purpose than to drag Mrs. Trevor down into the pit of abomination with himself. He cared not how deep he fell, provided she was smothered in it; and he sent a messenger off with the letter on his best horse, with orders to catch the post or never enter his presence again.

In about an hour the horse returned riderless, reeking and panting, the letter carefully buttoned up in the pocket of the saddle. The horse was not yet born that could go seven miles in ten minutes.

There was fate in all this, as Sir Robert acknowledged to himself in the morning. The writing of the letter had cooled his rage, yet not deadened the satisfaction he felt at confessing his iniquity. To wage war against a woman was unmanly, and such a woman, was degrading. He would write to Godfrey; but the revenge he promised himself for Mrs. Trevor's letter should be of another sort. He hoped to live to make her feel what the real meaning of an indiscriminate introduction might be.

Straightforward, sincere, energetic (because he felt a glow of good yet left in him), Sir Robert wrote a letter to Mr. Asheton, of which he was not ashamed when it was finished.

He asked for no forgiveness—he had not the right to do so. Plainly he set forth his temptation, alluding (only because it was necessary for the deciphering of his tale) to the presumption that Mr. Asheton cared more to keep his children to himself than to return to his wife.

If reply were vouchsafed to him, he would wait Mr. Asheton's will; there might be some wish regarding his son. As anxious that this letter should go as the first, Sir Robert himself bore it to the post, and heaved a sigh of satisfaction when it was really beyond his recal. But as all excited feelings have their reaction, and in human nature it is scarce possible to be good all at once, he relapsed into a desponding condition. The possibility that

his brother-in-law might think it necessary to exact from him the ordeal honour is supposed to demand, crossed his mind, and while without fear for himself, he regarded with horror even the mock raising of his hand against one he had injured.

Again, he thought of his son; of late, he had become proud of him; at the age when he most required it, he was to be removed from the influence that had made him what he was.

The punishment was fit. The injurer must feel in the very point wherein the injured had been wrung; and in lamenting the loss of such a home and mother for his son, Sir Robert remembered with humility the mourner sitting by the sea-shore weeping for her children.

His letter was answered by return of post.

“DEAR FANE,

“I have no one to blame but myself. For your son, he has settled the score I might have had against you, leaving me, I fear, his debtor. At present, you and I are better apart; when we meet, let it be without the remembrance of the last four years.

“Yours,


“GODFREY ASHETON.”

Under the first feeling of relief that this letter gave him, Sir Robert wrote off to his friend, who had interest with the Secretary of the Colonies, and applied for that particular situation, whilom so obnoxious to his social and convivial feelings. In doing this, he considered it but a proper sacrifice to make to Marion. He did not expect any immediate banishment. People were not likely to vacate a desirable situation merely to please him, and he was not absolutely justified in going to one utterly disagreeable.

He did, what we have seen him do before, counted up his losses and gains; and he could not but own himself that it was a peculiar and significant fact, he was, within one hundred pounds, neither richer nor poorer than he was at the moment he listened to the suggestions of his evil spirit and Miss Flower, and Mr. Asheton's tantrums carry him off from truth and common sense.

“Very little reason will my boy have to thank me; he will inherit a title, and have to break stones on the road for a living perhaps. If it is only for his sake I must work. I am now in what men call their prime. Let me see if a straightforward,

honest mode of making money will bring better results than my past life. I am sick of it; indeed, anxiety ages one. Really, if I am banished to the dullest, hottest, dryest hole in Africa, I will make myself happy, thinking of dear little Marion—provided also I have a good salary.”



CHAPTER LXV

MR. ASHETON WISHES THAT HE WAS OF ANY OTHER RACE THAN
THAT OF ASHETON.

SIR ROBERT FANE'S state of mind was not to be envied—Mr. Asheton's was still less so. For the first few days after his return home, he generously left the mother and children entirely to themselves. In no instance did he interpose his will or presence. Anxious as he might be, as he was, that Marion should remember she was a wife as well as a mother, he studiously occupied himself with Mr. Hearn, going round his estates, and visiting his tenantry, after his long absence; not even seeing his children, so long the sole object of his care, but once a day. It perhaps had been well for him if some cause of complaint, some neglect or wrong to be set right, some mistake, had occurred in the management of his affairs during his long absence. On the contrary, had he superintended them himself, nothing could have been more satisfactory. As he walked through the village, he was gratified with the taste and effect of the improvements, still more so, when, presuming upon the urbanity he showed, which was not characteristic of the Ashetons, himself the least of all, the villagers congregated round him with congratulations.

“Our young madam is happy—God bless you, sir. She mourns no longer; that was all as we prayed for, sir—that she might have her pretty babes back. We wish you, and the dear madam, long life and happiness.”

It was on these words, repeated now from house to house, from labourer to servant, servant to tenant, tenant to friend, that he meditated on the day-week of his return home. Long life and happiness! Surely it could not be that she had ceased to love him?

On the first morning after his return home, he had gone eagerly forward to greet her, taking her fondly in his arms, saying :—

“Ah, Marion, I could have only spared you to our children; I waited, after you had taken them to bed, expecting you to return—I had so much to say.”

“They did not like me to leave them,” she answered, hurriedly.

But the next morning she was even more cold. She did not appear to see that he was about to greet her as before; she evaded his kiss. The thought harassed him. He would watch the next morning. It was true, she presented but her hand, as if that was now a matter of course. Their limit of intimacy was to be bounded by a cold touch of the fingers. Yet she could love, she had loved.

He would be generous. She should hear, see, and love nothing but her children. He would wait patiently, until his very patience would reprove her. So he withdrew more and more—he had even his meals solitary and apart.

But on this day he had heard how she employed the large sum he had meant for her sole use. There was some deeper meaning in her conduct than a reluctance to be separated even a moment from her children.

He must ask her—and it must be now. When seated at her own and the children’s early dinner, she could not avoid hearing and answering his request for an interview after the meal was over.

“Rupert, come,” she said, coaxingly, to her boy, as she followed Mr. Asheton into his study, he not losing sight of her until he could claim her promise.

“Yes, I will come; I want to thank you, father, for being so kind to us. Though I have been so happy with my mother, and am never tired of going about, trying to recal everything, I have missed you very much, father.”

Godfrey looked at Marion; she had turned away; he would have given up scores of his prejudices at her bidding, could he but have known that it was shame—shame—that her boy, and not herself, had thought of his neglect and loneliness, that tinged the tip of her ear so deep a die, the only part of her face he could see—he, once the Godfrey of her heart.

“Father, I cannot help running after my mother all day. Everything she does is so nice and mother-like, and so pretty!

Don't get so red, mamma. Did you ever, father, see anyone so pretty as our mother, or so young?"

"Never, Rupert."

"She will be angry with me. Love your boy, mother. There is but one thing I wish to say—the very sight of this home does me good. I wish to be worthy of it. After all, father, this excellent thing is done by our horrible life abroad. We should never have known the contrast. Accustomed to it, I might not have felt as now, that God, having given us this beautiful home, all these nice kind people, and such a father and mother, I ought—I must—I will strive to be a good and worthy man. Now, father, you shall wait no longer. I know you want our mother as much as we do," and ere Marion could stay him, he was gone.

"I do, indeed. Marion—my wife!—you have not forgiven me."

"I understand not what you mean—"

"Hush; belie not your frank nature, but tell me how I am to regain my place in your heart?"

"I know not; I have no forgiveness—that is, I have forgiven you from my heart. All is dismissed from my mind."

"And can you mock me with such a reply? When I remember my Marion, the Marion of old, I want soft, gentle words coined afresh to express what she was. And now—"

"What is valueless is soon unlearned."

"Valueless—Marion! you forget. Nothing ever was more true than my words. I would not seek the fulfilment of my wishes at the price of losing your affection."

"And I believed those words then, as I believe them now." She paused.

"Yet, Marion, you have a sore against me in your heart. When I thanked God, the first night of my arrival, that, without explanation, with a highmindedness that made me rejoice such a being belonged to me and my children, you accorded my pardon, I did not think it was to be after this fashion. I may be forgiven in words, but not in heart—I will not accept the one without the other."

"Sir, Mr. Asheton, it is not that—I—I regret nothing regarding our children. I am glad you fulfilled your wishes—it was so best. But—"

"Well, Marion?"

"But when I was about to be married to you, no reservation was made even in my most secret thoughts, that but scant love

should be yours, did you in aught give umbrage to that love. But you—you made provision against a tie that might be too stringent. You made yourself God, mocking His sacred ordinance. Had I known it at first, you should not have borne this sin upon your soul. Now, I have but one course. I am the mother of your children—but your wife—a wife to be pensioned off with two thousand a year, as the fit takes you—excuse me—I am not skilled in worldly sins—I know not how the world regards such arrangements, or why the sacred tie of wife is necessary for such hearts. I think differently. At the altar my husband became to me the better part of myself. As such, I gave him all I had to give, even my children. But he died suddenly to me one day, and I mourned him; even now I mourn, as his widow.”

As Marion, with that sudden burst of feeling which in shyish natures often pours out hidden fervours with irresistible utterance, gave voice to these words, Mr. Asheton listened as one suddenly stricken to marble.

His silence had perhaps given her speech. She feared a pause. But now she had said all;—true feeling is not to be measured by words. She had looked fearlessly at him; she was looking still. It is given to natures like Marion’s to understand how to deal with a sudden shock.

“Mr. Asheton, I am a woman. I cannot help my womanly feelings, but, believe me, I will do my duty by you. Do not look so surprised, so shocked—I cannot help my heart; it is a very tender one. If bruised, there seems no healing for it; if broken, it must die. Not again will it bear to be used as something insignificant, unconsidered, when Asheton whims hold rule. Take heed to my words. Help the mother of your children to respect herself.”

But the blow was too sudden. Her very words, stirring within him as much love and admiration as anguish, made the task she gave him too severe.

Again she essayed her power of gentleness.

“We have a happy task before us—the education of our children.”

“We—our,” he exclaimed, in sudden bitterness; “use your own discretion, Mrs. Asheton—”

“Marion hopes, then, you will aid her,” and she laid her hand upon his arm. No answer.

“Marion dares not undertake the task without your counsel.” She took his hand. “Say ‘Yes, Marion,’ to make me happy.”

"Yes, Marion." There was no denying her.

"Thank you;" and the earnestness with which she pronounced those two words told him he could confer no greater boon upon her.

CHAPTER LXVI.

MR. AND MRS. ASHETON TRY TO OUTWIT EACH OTHER.

AND now, having given a week to entire love and idleness, the Ashetons commenced their home life. If it was different (and in some respects painful) to what Mr. Asheton expected, there were yet many charms in it.

As the days went on, these charms increased. How, shall be explained as we pursue their history. While Mr. Asheton apparently conformed to the line Marion marked out as the barrier of their intercourse, in his secret heart he infringed it whenever the opportunity offered.

Eight or ten years ago he would have laughed with scorn had he been told that he would sit, with beating heart, every morning, waiting for the ringing of a certain bell; that, as it ceased, he would listen for one footfall among many—one voice mixed with others. As his children entered with their mother, each and all to bestow their morning salutations on their father, though outwardly calm, there was an inward throb he could scarcely control; it was now, at this time, that the only token of a tie between him and his wife was manifested. How he felicitated himself upon the sudden determination that had made him, on the morning succeeding their conversation, kiss her, after he had kissed the children, taking her by surprise. For very shame, she could not refuse before them. And it was this kiss—this morning salutation—for which Mr. Asheton rose up so eagerly every day, and longed for evening and night, and the morning again, as soon as it was over.

Marion at last acquiesced with a good grace. Evasion, delay, indifference, had no effect; Mr. Asheton would have his morning salute, even if she kept him waiting until evening; so she considered it best to make no more fuss. He considered this a point gained; he tried to remember her words, "Help the

mother of your children to respect herself," according to her desire, but there was nothing to echo the thought in his heart. He had insulted her feelings as a wife; he must win her aggrieved heart back again as a lover. The husband should disappear altogether. He was obnoxious—a grievance—he should be dead.

He tried one other point, but there she gained the victory. She always called him Mr. Asheton.

"My name is Godfrey," said he, at last, to her.

"Ah, but your mother always called your father Mr. Asheton—I thought you would like it."

"No, I like Godfrey better."

But she did not heed the wish. He promised himself a revenge for this some fitting opportunity.

That Marion had some trouble with her children, especially the girls, need scarce be told. It was more, however, in the correction of bad habits than untoward dispositions. They certainly had haughty tempers and imperious whims, under which their servants suffered; but the love everyone seemed to bear towards their mother, whose gentlest reproof scarce rose above a whisper, taught them the surest way to rule. An aversion to fresh air, cold water, and all the tidinesses of an English toilet, was harder to overcome. But the pride with which their mother showed them to their father, in their pretty cotton frocks, straw hats, and shining curls, gave them a pleasure too.

Old-fashioned, cumbrous, and unbecoming had been Mr. Asheton's notion of a child's dress. Heavy silks, rings, chains, lace, all the concomitants of which a lady's toilet is composed, was bought for these little children. In cotton frocks, too, they could romp and play, in which (tell it low) they began to take a strange delight. Miss Issa was pleased to have a waxen baby on whom she could exercise all those little tempers in which she somewhat resembled her Aunt Trevor. While Mabel doted on her dolly, as much because it was her first treasure as because it was called "May."

They were clever enough—little prigs of knowledge—it was requisite they should be turned into children again, with regular food, early hours, and plenty of exercise to renovate their complexions, and restore the elasticity of their minds. They did some lessons during the day, under the joint superintendence of both father and mother. These were opportunities of which Mr. Asheton took every advantage; at the same time he had to be watchful—the "presumptuous lover" received one or two

checks, given with a haughtiness few Ashetons had ever attained, and from which it took him infinite trouble to recover. But having satisfied himself that life was valueless without the love he had in former years somewhat disdained, he felt he must nerve himself for a battle as of life. Moreover, the task was doing him good. In the first place, it excited him. All are the better for a little "stirring of the blood." Secondly, it took him out of himself. He could no longer think only of Ashetons, he was so occupied watching every look, conjecturing every thought, treasuring up every word of another. And what a vast fund of pleasure did he open for himself in this! How refreshing it was to study a character so true, so fine—whose essence was of God, whose humanity was so pure! He grew to like his children to be wayward, that he might hear the mother-words and soft suggestions that persuaded them to right again; or was it because she invoked his name so often, and lured them on through love of him? Then the dawning of a real faith within the heart, awakened by the study of the Bible at Carrara, expanded into a desire and thirst for better things, that brought its own gifts of good things, plentiful to overflow.

"Mother," he overheard his fretful boy exclaim, "to think that I am to be shut up this lovely day, and only promised my ride if I do this task well. 'Tis too much."

"'Tis easy, Rupert; I could learn it."

"Yes; but I am treated like a baby. I would rather my father had said, 'Do this to please me,' than enforce my learning it, by saying I should lose my ride. And the coachman says Edward Fane rides so well. It sets me against the lesson."

"Then do it to please your father, and ride to-morrow."

"No, no, that is too much."

"Ah! well, perhaps so, to a selfish person. But if I had a father like yours, I should learn this lesson better than best. I should take it to him, saying, 'I learn this to please you. I will ride to-morrow.' I know what your father would do. He would never again say anything, but, 'Do this, to please me.'"

"Mother, I will do it. I shall feel like a conqueror."

The Demoiselle Isobel, haughty as she was, descended to the meanness of a blow when her ire was excited; and the stout cheek of her German attendant often bore the impress of her little fingers.

"Miss so wicked," sobbed the girl, one day running to Marion for protection; "me serve her no more."

"That I take care you shall not," retorted the young lady,

following her in. "Mamma, pray pay her wages, and dismiss her at once."

"Go, my good girl," answered her mother, kindly laying her hand on her shoulder, "I will speak to you again by and bye. Meantime, if my daughter is not sorry for having so far forgotten herself, I am."

"Miss very wicked; sweet madam very kind; me have no friend in this crowded England."

"I am your friend; all my servants are my friends; do not fear."

"Mamma," exclaimed Issa, as the girl left the room smiling, "how could you touch her, or speak to her so kindly?"

"Because, my daughter having acted wrongly, it was necessary her mother should atone, until she sees her error herself and repents."

"It may have been unladylike in me to strike her, but she should remember I am Miss Asheton, and she only a servant."

"I wish Miss Asheton always herself remembered that she is Miss Asheton. I fear sometimes she forgets it."

"How, mamma?"

"My Miss Asheton, the one I love, would endeavour so to grace her station, that all the world could say she is indeed Miss Asheton; she acts in accordance with the high position which the Almighty has assigned her. But that other girl, who strikes her servants, and bids them submit because she is Miss Asheton, is not worthy to be so. She is a little foolish thing, whom good folks pity, and wicked ones laugh at."

"Mamma, I wish to be your Miss Asheton; but pray forgive me for saying I am much superior to servants."

"In what, my Issa? You are silent. Are you faithful as Stephenson—trustworthy as Payne—patient as your own Gretchen? They are in lowly situations in the world; but if they do their duty faithfully in the eyes of God, they may be higher than you, who consider Miss Asheton exempt from all duty, merely because she happens accidentally to be Miss Asheton. Did you make yourself? By what title do you claim the right to do wrong, while everyone else around you must not waver in the least from your command?"

"Mamma, teach me to be the right Miss Asheton—one that shall be loved and respected as you are."

These were some among the many traits with which Marion proved to Godfrey that her mother's instincts were superior to his paternal theories. As for Mabel, she bloomed like the roses,

and was a perpetual little sunshine in herself. It seemed as if a fretful, sickly little changeling had accompanied Mr. Asheton abroad, and that he had found his own baby Mabel at home. And how precious were her little loving ways! How Mr. Asheton encouraged all those little imperious caresses that included father and mother almost in one kiss, taking them on her little soft lips, as often as she chose to give them, straight from her mother's.

She was too coaxing to be refused anything, yet too tender to bear even a grave look. She had no naughtinesses; she was so made up of love, she loved nothing but to gain love.

Whether Mr. Asheton had any ulterior motive in his plans, or not, was never known; but having gravely requested Marion to aid him in cultivating the acquaintance of their neighbours, they spent two or three afternoons in each week visiting. If the distance was short, they were accompanied by Rupert; if longer, they went in the carriage, Isobel or Mabel, or both, being their companions.

Mr. Asheton derived so much pleasure now from merely looking at and watching his wife, that he rather encouraged the presence of the children. It removed her restraint, and he saw her as her nature and heart had made her.

But vast was the amazement of the county—too deep at first for utterance.

Mr. Asheton returned home—Mrs. Asheton become sane—Mr. Asheton quite sociable—Mrs. Asheton prettier than ever—Mr. Asheton acting and talking as if he thought himself no better than his neighbours—Mrs. Asheton lively, chatty, clever. What could it all mean? It meant something very pleasant, and none felt more happiness than the kind duchess. It is as good as being a king to have a fine income, a good house, and a sociable heart. When such people settle down in a country, they revivify and invigorate it with worthy, healthy pleasures. Their example is contagious, their manners enlivening, their habits regenerating. What could a king desire more? The Ashetons were about to begin to reign, for the first time in their haughty lives.

CHAPTER LXVII.

MR. ASHETON BEGINS HIS FIRST COURTING.

"MARION," said Mr. Asheton, returning from one of the long walks with which he often concluded the summer evening, "I have been hurt—much hurt."

He looked as if he were so.

There was no flying now to his arms for forgiveness of any untoward dereliction against Asheton rules. She calmly replied :—

"It can be remedied, I suppose."

"Yes," he answered, becoming subdued at the recollection of the contrast between the past and the present; "and I hope you will do so to oblige me."

"Certainly, if it is possible," replied she, with the voice and air that said, "Obliging you is no such matter of pleasure." And he understood them too.

"I inquired for whom they were preparing Maxwell's lodgings on the beach. I understand they are engaged for your sister, Lady Gordon. Marion, you have insulted me—still more the memory of my father and mother, who loved your sister's name for your sake. Lodgings! with Asheton Court at hand. A hired house for my sister Kythe, her brother's house so near! You have—and you use the right to place a gravestone 'twixt yourself and me, but your sister is my sister. I go north to-morrow to escort her here."

Marion did not appear much put out by this burst of indignation; but when he intimated his intention of going for her sister, much as she tried to subdue it, he saw the start and flush of pleasure.

The remembrance of them comforted him the next morning on this the first separation from his children; it soothed his parting from her—it shortened the journey down. But he was not wholly unselfish in this journey. If Lady Gordon was the sort of person he hoped to find her, what a powerful advocate she might become in his favour! Subdued by grief, she could the more feel for his state; mourning her husband's loss, she

could the better feel his undergoing a daily parting, as it were—a living death.

By having her all to himself at first, he could gain a certain interest in her heart, and there plead with never-ceasing plaints.

If Marion had her misgivings that such was his secret intention, and therefore prepared a double case of steel wherein to environ the heart about to be pierced by a hand smitten of God, and so not to be turned aside—she made her preparations for nothing.

Evidently liking and delighting in the company of her hitherto unknown brother-in-law, Kythe never mentioned his name to Marion of her own accord.

“Were you not surprised when you saw Mr. Asheton, Kythe?”

“Very much so, May; he is so much better looking than I expected.”

“I mean at coming to fetch you,” said Marion, blushing.

“Not at all; when I saw him, I knew he was just the sort of person to do such a deed.”

“Do you think the children like him?”

“They have none of them, as yet, so refined and intellectual a countenance. He is a true gentleman, physically and morally. But what beautiful children they are, or rather will be, May, when they become more rosy. How thoroughly they enjoy having other children to play with them.”

Lady Gordon had had her own way in one thing. She was in Maxwell's lodgings; but when she told part of her sad story to Mr. Asheton, had shown him her two children, touched with the mark of separation from their kind, at their birth, he acquiesced at once. The feeling that made her less able to separate herself from the two stricken ones found a ready echo in his heart; therefore she remained with those two at the lodgings, gladly sending the elder ones, with their governess, to Asheton Court.

Never-ceasing were his brotherly attentions—his kindly thoughts; and if he had been bent upon discovering the truest way of wooing his Marion over again, he could not have devised a surer one. The first strawberries, the freshest flowers, the healthy treasures of the dairy, the delicate ones of the poultry-yard—whatever was rarest and best—found its way down to Maxwell's lodgings as a matter of course.

While a tiny donkey carriage, and many other little seasonable gifts calculated to amuse these “stricken ones,” appeared

from time to time, with little doubt as to who was the thoughtful donor.

About this time the Flowers came home—all three very different Flowers from what they were when they went away.

Mr. Flower no longer wrapt up his duties and himself in sermons; diminished already half a stone in weight, he was apparently preparing himself for some gymnastic feat, and desirous of reducing his portliness still more. For he was to be met at all hours, in all places, regardless of distance, heedless of weather, walking about his parish. If any nefarious, evil-minded, heartless, or incorrect matter was hatched in his district, by some marvellous intuition he got scent thereof—by equally marvellous activity he discovered it—and by sagacity, as unexpected as wonderful, defeated it.

There was no deceiving the parson; and yet there was such kindness in his manner, such an identifying of himself with the sinner, such a hearty cheering on towards the “narrow and perfect way that leadeth to eternal life,” that it may be truly said Mr. Flower did not belie his race.

He was a soldier—girt about with the whole armour of God. He had on the breastplate of Righteousness, his feet shod with the Preparation of the Gospel, his shield, helmet, and sword always ready. Mr. Flower felt he had a great work to do. His talent had been long wrapt up in a napkin and laid by. His Lord might come suddenly, and find the interest not yet gathered.

Mrs. Flower was also changed. Her adventures in “Foreign Parts” had enlightened her heart as to the fact of millions of people being in a worse condition than the world she had lived in at Asheton. She became less loquacious, she had so much to think about, and she did not take, as heretofore, everything for granted. She had her misgivings that Constant’s sermons could not reach the hearts of all his hearers, as had been her fond belief. A greater than her Constant must first bless the work ere he could hope his seed to bear fruit. Thus her life of happy security changed into one of more thoughtful prayer, and without losing his sunshiny Sophy, Mr. Flower obtained a more able helpmate.

But Prissy—poor Prissy—what can be said about Prissy? She had been warm-hearted, matter-of-fact, properly indignant on fitting occasions, easily duped on others. Sage, yet not considered wise; kind, but at times “vengeably savage;” acute, yet palpably innocent—all these things hath Prissy been in

turns, during the proceedings of this veritable history. But now she was none of them; or if she showed any symptoms of her former dispositions, they displayed themselves quite in the wrong place. They appeared upside down—conspicuously inverted.

When wisdom prevailed in the social circle, she was silly and gigglish; when hilarity was reigning, she was morose and high—very high in her conduct. If her advice was asked, she ironically laughed at the idea; if it was not asked, she wept, saying no one loved or cared for her.

When it was fine, she wondered anyone wished to go out. When it was wet, she was surprised a sprinkling of damp could hinder people taking their proper exercise.

In fact, Prissy was a riddle to all her friends at present, save one, and that one, strange to say, was Mr. Asheton. He fancied he recognized symptoms of a disease not unfamiliar to him; so he took Prissy under his protection, and encouraged her, no matter what outrageous sentiment she might propound at the most unseasonable moment.

Mr. Courtenay was too busy with his new duties, in London, to be able to come and see “the happy family,” as he styled them, at Asheton Court, just yet.

Meantime, about this period, Mr. Asheton had what he considered the exquisite happiness of perceiving that Marion had something to say to him. Enlightened by his constant study of her character, he knew that for three days running she had been attempting to prefer some request.

Would it not be but kind in him to assist her in her embarrassment? Not he; he hardened his heart, and steeled his nerves to the utmost. He could not sleep for thinking of the delight it would give him to see her obliged to say, “Sir, Mr. Asheton, I wish one word with you,” and of all he would say in return. But men are no match for the wits of women. On the fourth day Rupert said:—

“My mother wishes to know where Edward Fane is to spend his holidays; they begin next Tuesday. Oh, father, let him come here, both because my mother loves him so much, and because I wish to know him.”

Mr. Asheton had a mind to punish her for thus depriving him of his anticipated pleasure; so he said:—

“Edward is at Eton, and I hardly know if I like public schools as yet; tell your mother to come and talk it over with me, Rupert.”

"Ah! then, all my anticipations are over; she won't come, because I was to observe particularly if you disliked it; if so, she would and forbid him."

"You think she will not come?"

"I am sure she will not, father; because she has been making up her mind to ask you, and, fearing your refusal, requested me to do it."

"Then, Rupert, tell her from me, that if she had kindly asked me herself, she would have discovered that I am particularly anxious to have Edward here. If I like his appearance, manners, and acquirements, it is not impossible that I may wish to send you back with him, when old enough."

"Oh, father, thank you! My highest ambition is to be a regular schoolboy—to learn cricket, foot-ball, even marbles; a steeplechase! Dearest father, I have read and thought over all these things until I was quite sick with fear lest I should never know them; and I am jealous of Edward—very. Now, father, note the next time my mother hears from him, and you will see how her eyes sparkle."

"Perhaps, my boy, they do so because she has worthily done her duty by the spoilt child of a dead mother. I can remember the Edward of whom you are jealous—a most utterly odious child."

"It may be so; but still I am jealous."

That evening Mr. Asheton announced that, on a fitting day, settled by Marion, during Edward's stay, he meant to give a strawberry-party to the small people of ——shire, together with their respective fathers and mothers.

"Being inexperienced in these matters, I shall want council, both from you and Kythe. We must have various games. I shall require music for a dance. We invite for two o'clock, and break up at ten. I mean to make this, my first *fête*, a well-remembered one, and would wish to present my little guests with presents. For that purpose, Marion, as soon as you have fixed the day, I shall go to town, and shall be happy to execute commissions for everyone. You do not object, I hope?"

Mr. Asheton indulged in a little quiet irony now and then, to make his Marion look at him.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

MARION IS HUNTED DOWN AND CAPTURED BY MRS. TREVOR; WHILE MR. ASHETON ENCROACHES UPON HIS PRIVILEGES OUTRAGEOUSLY.

LADY GORDON was Godfrey's best coadjutor regarding the arrangements for his party. Marion had entered into it, heart and soul, at first, delighted as a child at the delight of her children. But really Mr. Asheton appeared so wilfully ignorant, requiring her advice upon the merest trifles—unable even to write the invitations unless she came down to assist him, after the children were all gone to bed. Then, by degrees, instead of making out the lists, and finishing writing, addressing, and sealing them, he would begin to talk of his foreign life and all he had seen, and that in so interesting a manner, that the clock actually struck midnight before she thought it could be ten. Blushing and scandalised, she whisked off in such a hurry, that she left him in the very middle of a sentence; which was rather mortifying for him, as he had meditated taking a comfortable sort of brotherly good-night, seeing her so conformable and pleasant.

The next evening, it was utterly impossible she could come, she had so much to do upstairs; so he foiled her with her own weapons, and for a few days only consulted Kythe. As for Prissy, after a slight brightening up upon hearing that elderly people, especially friends of the family, were heartily welcome, and that the party was not to consist only of children, she relapsed into her "foreign mood," as Marion called it. But she emerged again, temporarily affable and interested, when she heard Mr. Asheton was going to London the week before the party.

"Going to London. Ho, ha—going to London."

"Yes, Prissy, going to London, to buy presents, and games, and bonbons, and other good things."

"Not to invite any London people then?"

"No, certainly not; who would care to come from London to a child's party in the gardens?"

"I am sure, I don't know why they shouldn't. London

certainly might be a very nice place, but still a child's party at Asheton Court had never happened before. Mr. Asheton might just as well give some people the offer."

"I intend to do so, Prissy," remarked Mr. Asheton, over-hearing her.

"Oh, thank—goodness, how hot it is."

"Do you like the heat, Prissy?" asked Kythe, surprised at the fervent beginning and cross ending of her speech.

"No, that I don't." Prissy was not clever at disguising her feelings, at any time. Now less than ever.

It was a lovely July evening. The air was full of odours, wafted about by a quick summer breeze that kept playing aloft amid the trees, while the earth was all still and calm. The sound rose and fell as if it came from heaven, and was louder and fainter as the clouds opened and shut one over the other; for not a leaf stirred below, not a blade of grass moved, but the murmuring amid the boughs of the trees was continuous. Soft, stirring sound, like the rustle of angels' wings, hovering invisible over the objects of their care and love, all other sounds being hushed in this the noontide of the summer.

They were all seated on the grass in the cedar-walk, Kythe and Marion with their work, Mr. Asheton with his book, and the children resting, like the bees and birds, in summer idleness.

Rupert was watching his mother's face, as now and then she rose and listened. At first it was with a jealous feeling, for Edward was expected that evening. Suddenly he called out, "Ah, father, I have discovered your secret. I know now who is the original of 'The Listening Nymph,'—mother, mother, do you know there is a statue making of you at Carrara, that is to cost a thousand guineas, and my father designed it, and visited it, and thought of nothing else the last two months of our stay. It is so like."

If Rupert was in his father's other secret, namely, his design to win his mother's heart again, no plotter ever had better coadjutor. Godfrey caught the first glance of undisguised pleasure that his wife had yet deigned to bestow on him, though she afterwards tried to atone to herself by sending another after it, affectedly cold and indifferent. But that caused her to see the glow in Godfrey's eyes, which he permitted to shine out, full, refulgent, and which he bent upon her, manifestly unneeding speech. A rosy tint, in quick tide, like wave upon wave, overspread her face and neck as she saw it.

Endeavouring to look indignant, she started up, saying:—

"How quiet my little Mabel is. I thought she loved a race."

"A race, a race," said all the children; "mamma, Aunt May shall be the hare."

"Come, papa," said the imperious baby Mabel, mightily in love; "come, if you catch mamma, you may kiss her, but you never will catch her."

Mr. Asheton's heart beat a little too quick for running at present. He seated himself by Kythe, saying he would be judge, and expect to be kissed by the winner, at all events, for his trouble. This being faithfully promised, the hare had two minutes law, and off they all went, the shouts of delight deadening all other sounds.

"Kythe, did you see her?" asked Godfrey, as they two were left alone.

"Yes, dear Godfrey, she was evidently pleased."

"Do you think I am gaining ground?"

"I do indeed; yesterday she said to me, 'I wish you would discover for me if Mr. Asheton gives this party because of what I once said to him, of our children mixing with others, or because he wishes it himself.' I said it was your own desire; and she answered, 'Ah! Kythe, what fine hearts are those, who, having erred, frankly retrace their steps.' I made for the first time some slight remark in your praise. She waited, as if for me to say more, then, in that little pettish way she has sometimes, she said, 'That is but meagre praise for Mr. Asheton.'"

"God love you, Kythe, for your kind sympathy. If I gain her love again, you shall have no cause to repent your share in the deed. How pretty she looks flying in and out of the trees. I think Maybird was correct when she said I should not catch her. How swift she is, and graceful! I wish you had seen my dear father's love for her. He alone properly appreciated her from the first. But she pauses—who are these?"

Suddenly, as Marion was threading the trees at her swiftest pace, young Osman Gordon very near her, she stopped, instantly falling into the paws of the two nearest hounds. Blushing, panting, laughing at the children's glee, Marion tried to smooth her disordered hair, for there before her, petrified into the wildest astonishment, stood Mrs. Trevor. Behind, as if she guarded them from an invasion of Goths, stood the Miss Trevors, and their amiable father brought up the rear.

"Is that Mrs. Asheton?" murmured she, slowly.

Godfrey loved his sister at that moment, for Marion appealed to him for help with her eyes.

"My dear sister, you have descended suddenly upon a home-loving party, enjoying this lovely summer evening. You have been fortunate enough to capture our best hare, the only person who has yet done so. Allow me to congratulate you, while I introduce you to my sister, Lady Gordon. Children, go and amuse yourselves within earshot."

Anything so beautiful, at the same time so saintly, as Lady Gordon, rarely came in Mrs. Trevor's way. She was silent from involuntary admiration.

The colour rose to Kythe's pure white cheek, as she encountered this open, steady gaze, and to turn it she said:—

"We have been too noisy, otherwise we must have heard the wheels of your carriage."

"We did not expect you, sister," said Mr. Asheton.

"No, I hardly thought it necessary to write; I knew you would expect me as soon as it was in my power to come, and I considered that sufficient notice."

"For me it might be, Ellinor; but scarcely so to my wife. According to established rules, I believe, some deference is due to the mistress of the house. Your presence may be inconvenient to her," turning to Marion.

"My sister is welcome," answered Marion, proffering her cheek by way of proving her words.

She then warmly kissed Emma and Etta, bowing to their father, who having been assured, all the way on their journey, that Mrs. Asheton was nothing and nobody, and was about to be entirely extinguished by Mrs. Trevor, did not dare to hold out his hand until that worthy lady had given him permission.

Fortunately the omission was unnoticed, or perhaps noticed only to be a source of self-gratulation. Mr. Trevor held a position that very few people in this kindly world possess: he was not an object of interest to any single human being in the world—not even to his valet or himself. He was the husband of Mrs. Trevor, and the father of the young heiresses, and as it was necessary there should be some such person, dead or alive, he was the one. But it was the only individuality he had.

Rupert was despatched into the house, to order the necessary accommodation to be prepared, Mrs. Trevor being so far bewildered by her welcome as to feel it hazardous to say she had already given her own orders. But for Lady Gordon, the party would have felt silent and awkward. Godfrey was re-

calling, with ominous frown, the last time he had seen his sister, while that sister was rallying her nerves as best she could. Marion was trying to break through the reserve of the Miss Trevors, while they anxiously regarded their mother, to know if they might speak.

It was to be an evening of arrivals.

Rupert came running back, shouting—

“Edward has come; Edward Fane has arrived.”

“Good heavens! that dreadful boy, brother Godfrey; do not let him come here until I have taken my daughters into the house.”

She was too late. Bounding into the circle with no eyes, no thought, no heed for anyone but his Aunt May, appeared one of those fine blooming boys that at fourteen years of age are pictures to behold. He was rather small for his age, and had delicate features, with fair curling hair; but being older than any of the children present, browned by the sun to the hue of a summer apple, his eyes dark and glowing with excitement, and fringed with long, curling black lashes, he looked a beautiful, gleeful schoolboy, utterly unlike the Edward of old.

“My dearest, dearest Aunt May, I have done all you bid me; I have gained more; and my tutor would not write by post, lest the letter should arrive before I did; he said I deserved to tell you the good news myself; but, oh, that I should think of myself first—you are happy again. God bless you, Uncle Asheton, for bringing my cousins home.”

And dashing the sudden tears from his eyes, he took his uncle's hand as if to kiss it; but he tenderly pressed him in his arms, saying:—

“Welcome home, my dear boy, my Marion's eldest boy. Such shall you be to me.”

“This is not Edward,” exclaimed Mrs. Trevor, oracularly.

“Yes, Aunt Trevor; I know you very well, and my cousins, Emma and Etta. How naughty I used to be to you! Will you forgive me? I will do my best to make up.”

They promised instant forgiveness, in high little keys; and then, after the manner of some little maidens more forward than others, straightway fell in love, the one with his eyes, and the other with his curls.

Rupert alone stood aloof.

Edward was again caressing the darling Aunt May.

“But which are my own cousins; those whom I am to love more than anything in the world, because they are yours, Aunt May?”

Marion called her three children. Baby Mabel kissed him at the first word, and was ready to do so again upon the slightest hint. The Demoiselle Issa held out her hand, which Master Fane, truly polite, but boyishly diverted, duly saluted.

But he and Rupert looked at each other after the manner of puppies, one of whom has strayed into the sacred path of the other.

"Rupert, pray love me," whispered Edward; "be my brother, that Aunt May's love may be mine still more."

Agreeing to such a compact, the smaller puppy extended his hand, and they two entered that evening into a bond of brotherhood—which, being founded on their mutual love for another, grew with the love and devotion they paid her, rivalling each other.

But now it was time to go within. Lady Gordon went home, escorted by Godfrey, as usual. Marion showed the still bewildered Mrs. Trevor to her apartment; she then superintended the school-room tea, at which she generally presided as partaker; but she considered, as they had company, it was proper she should appear at the late dinner. Leaving them all very happy, guarded by her sister's governess, she ran hastily upstairs to prepare her evening toilet.

Arrayed in her dressing-gown, all her fair hair let down to be re-adjusted, she heard a knock at the door. As none but females ever ventured up into that part of the house, she said at once, "Come in."

The door opened, and Mr. Asheton appeared on the threshold. Astonished, Marion stood before him, silent.

Fearing a peremptory dismissal, and not venturing to look at her, he said, hurriedly:—

"I intruded—I could not send you such a message by a servant, but I wished to ask you to be so kind as to dine with me this evening. Kythe recommended me to do so," continued he, venturing a few steps within, as if he feared he might be heard outside.

"I am preparing—I intended doing so," answered Marion, with a manner that would have turned a glowing coal into an icicle.

Seeing her "defending of herself," Mr. Asheton thought himself justified in giving her something to defend.

"So you have never changed your room, the one my dear mother described to me. And our daughters sleep here too. So near the leads—do you not feel it very hot this weather?"

"There are so many windows," stammered Marion.

"True," said he. "How often I have thought of this room, and pictured it to myself."

"The dressing-bell has rung some time, Mr. Asheton."

"Has it?—then I will go. But you must let me come again and see it. I hear the view is lovely; besides, Marion, my children never before laid their heads upon their pillows without my seeing them, until I gave them back again to you."

"Pray don't let me prevent your doing it again, if such is your wish," said Marion, with a voice like cream just thundered into acidity. Mr. Asheton, warned, departed. He dressed himself in a hurry. He hated his grand, stately apartment, orderly and spotless. He wished it was a long, low room, full of odd things, littered with books, flowers, dresses, anything. And so absorbed was he, that he forgot all about his sister—and almost started as if she had been a ghost when he entered the drawing-room.

Mrs. Trevor was grown to that age when females enlarge. She had a double chin, her throat was somewhat like a pillar of fat, her complexion, never good, was now bad. She was elaborately dressed. Was she not the mother of heiresses? Still she did not look well by the side of Marion, whose slight form and girlish look were enhanced by the simplicity of her black dress.

The Miss Trevors were arrayed as became heiresses; much cut up into flounces, and greatly covered over with bows, especially on their heads, which appeared to be wholly composed of ribbons. Mr. Trevor, whose legs had become weaker, presented the melancholy appearance of a broken-down butler.

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF MR. ASHETON'S STRAWBERRY PARTY.

MRS. TREVOR found it expedient to be delighted with everything at Asheton Court. So Mr. Trevor shook hands with any one who would allow him the chance. And the Miss Trevors began to forget they were heiresses, except when their mother

was by, falling more deeply in love with Edward every day. As for Lady Gordon, Mrs. Trevor discovered, for the first time in her life, that Heaven had made a human being, in all respects superior to an Asheton. She was very sincere in her admiration of her; and as it is decreed by the Almighty that we should mutually benefit each other, it appeared not improbable that Mrs. Trevor's mind might warp straight from one or two of its crooked turns, under her influence. She gave a very decided opinion as to the inexpediency of the strawberry party. But discovering that Lady Gordon approved of it, she swung round like a ship obeying its helm, and immediately consulted her as to the dresses proper for her girls, who, not yet out, but being heiresses, required, in her opinion, some requisite costume to distinguish their peculiar situation.

Meantime, if Mr. Asheton held a sort of court one morning (the one previous to going to London) for the purpose of learning every one's private commissions, he was disappointed in obtaining an interview with Marion. She sent her commissions, excellently described and written down, by Mabel.

So he set off, only comforted by one thing, which he owed to the presence of his sister.

Marion had to submit to a very tender leave-taking, which she bore with so bad a grace that Mrs. Trevor's eyes were opened. She scarcely knew whether she ought to be indignant at Marion's indifference, or gratified at her comporting herself so like an Asheton.

So she consulted Lady Gordon, who, having already fathomed the shallowness of her mind, declared they had no right to question the matter.

"Certainly, in that I perfectly agree with you; and if you had been my brother's wife, I should have said nothing. Marion is so childish; she looks more like a girl now than when I last saw her. I have never ceased regretting, since I had the happiness of knowing you, that you were not my brother's choice."

"I have the satisfaction of feeling that Godfrey has no such regret. He loves his Marion more fondly than ever."

"Yes, apparently he does, which is so strange to me, for she appears almost rude to him at times."

"He has much to make up to her—taking advantage of her youth and almost loneliness. None among her new family, except your father, appears to have known her true worth. I may speak of her as one not related to me, because we have, though sisters, known each other but lately."

"I grant there are one or two points in which Marion may resemble you."

"I would there were more, for my own sake. Look around the world, Mrs. Trevor, and see if, among all, you could find one, who, young, lovely, loving—a wife, a mother—would comport herself as my May has done, the four years she was left in a worse condition than widowed and childless. If I pride myself on one thing, it is that I am her sister."

Mrs. Trevor's heart was a very small one. It was so cased in with pride and prejudices, that there had never been given it a chance to expand.

But a crack was making in the wall—there appeared good hopes it would enlarge. No longer sore upon being from her birth nothing particular in the family except what she made herself to be felt, Mrs. Trevor was softened. Fate had found her out and indemnified her; she had waited a long time, but still her position in the world was marked out at last—she was the mother of heiresses.

After this conversation, she kindly regarded Marion with favour, and simple strangers might have supposed she doted on her, and had always done so.

During this period, all unwotted by their mother, the heiresses had, for the first time in their lives, a quarrel. The budding ages of thirteen and fourteen were rather early for a tragedy of love and jealousy to be enacted between them. But so it was. In conjecturing who had sent for presents, and who had not, Etta propounded the expectation that Edward would send for one for her, which she should evermore regard as her dearest treasure.

Emma shrilly asked, "And why not one for me?" Then ensued cruel recriminations, ending with floods of tears, the spring of which was suddenly dried up by the approach of their mamma.

On Mr. Asheton's return, the Court assumed an appearance entirely unknown in its history. It was like an enormous beehive, so excited was everybody. Mrs. Trevor began to regret her refusal to participate in the second great amusement of the day, after the strawberry campaign, namely, the drawing of prizes or presents.

"Oh, Aunt Trevor," exclaimed Mabel, clasping her hands in an ecstasy of feeling, "more and more presents are put in every hour, and the great basket is so full, papa has ordered another to be brought. I wonder how many there will be for you."

"None, my dear, I should think. Not exactly knowing if I should approve of such things, I declined giving or receiving."

"Oh, but I know there are parcels for you. Of course, Aunt Trevor, I put in something for you myself; but I must not tell you what. You will have to guess, because that is to be our fun."

In this exciting time, Marion descended from her stilts almost entirely. Godfrey took care to be extremely respectful in manner, though he did not permit his eyes to be silent. He was anxious his *fête* should go off well, and he knew he should feel the wish to drown himself, if Marion chose to be offended at anything, and that sort of feeling was not compatible with being an amiable host. He settled the programme of the party with Kythe, ably assisted (as she thought) by Mrs. Trevor. But her notions of a child's party were much on a par with her idea of Mount Vesuvius doing the same thing, and kindly boiling the kettle for tea in its own crater.

When Godfrey submitted the plan to Marion, which, in the first place, consisted of the dinner at two o'clock, followed by strawberries and cream in the garden, she suggested that, instead of the presents being distributed out of the baskets, as all were standing round, they should be hung on the branches of the trees in the cedar walk, all marked with their proper names, the smaller children's below, the taller higher up. Thus the children could run about and seek for their own presents; and as there was a private list of them, Mr. Asheton would be able to see they were properly appropriated to the rightful owners.

This amendment was carried *nem. con.*, Lady Gordon, Mr. Asheton, and Stephenson undertaking to see it executed, if the weather was favourable.

No day ever broke more beautifully. Lady Gordon's mourning was too deep for her to appear at Asheton Court after two o'clock, though she was very busy before.

Two o'clock approached—the first carriage was descried—all appeared ready dressed. Master Asheton was highly delighted with a proper boy's jacket and trousers, and a faultless tie, borrowed from Edward for the day; he had taken private opportunities of rolling on gravel and grass to take the shine off his new clothes, and the constant brushing that ensued assisted that amiable deception.

The Miss Ashetons had thick white frocks, high up to the throat, with little frills of lace round, and broad bands of

insertion work to decorate them, white straw hats, and black ribbons, little grey boots.

The little Gordons were in deep mourning for their father.

The Miss Trevors had light-blue silk dresses, with five flounces, and little lace tippets. But they looked odd, for they had short sleeves, which did not accord with little white bonnets, decorated with forget-me-nots.

Though their quarrel was made up, they were not quite happy. Emma had asked Edward to dance with her, and, in school-boy fashion, he had graciously replied, "Oh, I will dance with both of you."

Thus Etta had the advantage of being able to say he had asked her.

Every carriage that drove up appeared to contain a more hilarious and delighted party than the last. Until all being assembled, the business of the day began, and went on prosperously without a check.

Mr. Asheton discovered this day that one of the surest methods of making yourself popular, is to give a child's party. He had no idea he was considered so delightful a person before, as he was led to conclude he was now. Favoured by the presence of so goodly a company, he took one advantage for himself out of his party. He made the most audacious open love to his wife that the usages of society would accord to an accepted lover—which, of course, in the innocent, unsuspecting eyes of the company present, only showed Mr. Asheton in a more favourable light than ever—that of an affectionate and attentive husband. Whereas if they could but have seen into Mrs. Marion's heart, how she pished, petted, fumed, at being compelled to submit to being set on high as an adored wife—a husband's idol.

Nos. 1 and 2 were there, our ancient friends, who, encountering Prissy, secretly determined upon discovering the real clue to all these wonderful things, but Prissy's state was this day that of sublime endurance.

"It is too hot for anything," says she, severely, intimating she was in no mood to have her time wasted in answering foolish questions.

"Too hot, Miss Priscilla, after Carrara?"

In former days, Prissy would have screamed upon being surprised. Now, having made up her mind that surprises were foolish things, she had given up being surprised at anything.

Nevertheless, though she said nothing, those that knew Prissy

intimately would have seen she hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

Nos. 1 and 2, seeing nothing in the last speaker but a weather-beaten, scarred-face elderly gentleman, took no further interest in him, for, being determined to see everything, and note down the smallest occurrence, they went from one group to another in the house, from one corner of the garden to another, hoping they were at the bottom and top of everything. Whereas, they generally left a place just as some amusement was beginning, and arrived at another just as it ended. Such is the fate of half the fidgety pleasure-seeking world.

"Oh, Mr. Courtenay, what has happened?"

"Nothing, my dear Miss Priscilla; did you not know I was expected, even at the latest moment? I came in by the four o'clock train, and am in time for tea at all events."

"Oh, yes," said Prissy, absently.

She was thinking how foolish it was of her not to see that she was perfectly tidy before she left the Wood-head; only she was comforted by knowing that May would have righted her instantly.

CHAPTER LXX.

THE FINALE OF THE STRAWBERRY PARTY, AND THE EXTRAORDINARY EFFECT IT HAD UPON PRISSY.

CERTAINLY one of the most successful events of the day was that search after presents. The older and graver part of the company seated themselves in various groups among the trees, while the little ones, assisted by those who could still call themselves juvenile, sought for parcels. Very clever had been the hidiers; still more clever felt the finders. Each parcel was brought to Mr. Asheton, and the direction seen; if the rightful owner found it, he or she opened it then and there—if not, it was again secreted.

But as for the shouts of delight, the exclamations of pleasure, the shrieks of surprise, never before had the time-honoured trees of Asheton Court heard such sounds.

Mrs. Trevor, as became her birth, maintained a sort of stately

air; but when, as one present after another was brought to her, and she discovered that none had forgotten her in the family circle, she became remorseful, thanking the little donors three or four times over, and snubbing Mr. Trevor for not being sufficiently grateful. He, poor man, borne down with the weight of her presents and his own, became weaker than ever about the legs, besides being almost in tears for want of a flow of words to express his feelings.

To the elderly spectators, who did not receive presents, but whose children did, it afforded a most pleasing sight to see the Ashetons—those proud Ashetons—receiving and accepting little gifts with so much warmth and family love.

There was Mrs. Asheton received one, which, by the blush that rose on her face, must have been of extraordinary value, yet No. 1 was but just in time to see it was a bracelet, blazing with diamonds. Mrs. Trevor, who had had it in her hand, could not understand it at all. A lion *couchant*, in dead gold—the crest of the Ashetons—a little Una seated upon it, throwing all over him a fine net-work, linked in every link with a diamond.

Perhaps Mrs. Trevor did not notice the engraving within, because it was then the blush rose so vividly to Marion's cheek. However, she was so overwhelmed with presents, that she had not time to bestow much attention upon any one in particular.

Edward was rather bored by Emma and Etta constantly asking him which was his present to them, for he avowed he had, of course, given them each one; and in the innocence of their inexperienced hearts, they guessed all to be his, until they arrived at the right conclusion.

"Which is your present to my brother, Marion? I see he has almost as many as yourself."

"Has he? I don't know exactly; indeed, I think I forgot to get him one."

Mrs. Trevor treasured this up for Lady Gordon's hearing.

As for Prissy, she was quite a new Prissy, burnished up with smiles and good-humour until she was refulgent with amiability.

In fact the party was a great success; and after everyone was gone, Mr. Asheton gravely thanked Marion for being the original means of giving him so much pleasure.

"My sister told me you gave it to please yourself."

"But you remember what you used to tell me a long time ago, about our children mixing with the world. My experiment having failed, I had a wish to try yours. You have the result in my thanks."

It was impossible for anyone so keen-eyed as Mr. Courtenay not to perceive that the "happy family" were not quite so happy as they ought to be. Animated and agreeable as Mr. Asheton was in company, when out of it, or rather, as Mr. Courtenay discovered, when Marion was not present, he was nearly as absent and unhappy as at Carrara.

The shy yet ward-and-watch hauteur, that appeared to possess the gentle Marion, soft and gay with all but Mr. Asheton, opened his eyes.

"After all," cogitated he to himself, "the Almighty permits us to see nothing perfect on this earth. That anything like a vindictive spirit should exist in so feminine a mould surprises me. Besides, it belies her character. My friend Asheton is redeeming his in my eyes. I shall assist him, though I am sad, very sad, that she should have fallen from her high estate in my estimation—I had thought her more forgiving. In fact, I did not think her a woman. I'll go and consult Mr. Flower."

The result of their conference was a visit to Lady Gordon. Marion was restored to her original high pedestal in Mr. Courtenay's favour upon hearing that her estrangement from her husband arose from nothing regarding the children, but dated from an act even before his marriage.

Mr. Flower had again to deplore his supineness.

"Had I made the least remonstrance, I feel certain old Mr. Asheton would have seen the iniquity of such a clause in the settlements. I must now appeal to my niece."

"Not so," answered Lady Gordon, "Marion's heart is so true in its affections she will do nothing from compulsion. Godfrey alone has it in his power to make her believe he loves her; and I feel persuaded he will succeed."

"Yes, if his health does not fail," remarked Mr. Courtenay. "Even in my short knowledge of him, he has aged wonderfully. Nothing hurts the constitution like a troubled mind."

"I am sure she will see that as soon as any of us," answered Lady Gordon.

"Are you sure that silly woman, Mrs. Trevor, has not something to do with it—my mind misgives me whenever I look at that woman."

"No, no, Mr. Courtenay, think better of Marion than that."

"I shall draw up a sort of account of all I discovered when I was last in England, and of the three visits I paid—one to Mrs. Trevor, one to Sir Robert Fane, and one to Miss Flower. You also, my dear sir, can add your testimony of what you overheard.

Joined to this, I shall describe Mr. Asheton's demeanour, his refusal to hear all this, his joy at the first word, and his instant belief—and the deuce is in it, if, when she reads it—which I shall take care she does—she does not relent.”

“I see no objection to this, Mr. Courtenay. You can give her the packet as if it was of no particular consequence; but that there was some little account of affairs abroad, she ought some day to know. But she must not mention the affair to Mr. Asheton; he might dislike her to know all he endured.”

“Ha, ha! set a woman to catch a woman. When their pride is offended, they put me in mind of those baits for fish all over hooks, you cannot speak without being pricked. We must show clear water, otherwise she'll out with her hooks.”

“This does not please me, Kythe; as her uncle and pastor, I ought to reason with her,” said Mr. Flower.

“Let us try Mr. Courtenay's design first, then your remonstrances may fall upon a softened heart.”

“I intend following Lady Gordon's advice to the very letter; meantime, I shall give Asheton a little help after my own fashion.”

But cautious as Mr. Courtenay was that Marion should not suspect his design, he feared she did, by the indifference with which she listened to any remarks about Mr. Asheton's health. He scarcely ever addressed them directly to her, and made his observations in a careless, natural manner, well calculated to deceive. “But she is a regular vixen,” said he to himself every night, as the only mode he had of expressing his vexation.

Meantime, it began to dawn upon him he had a little business of his own to do as well. It was impossible for the unsophisticated Prissy to hide her pleasure in his society. And while his weather-beaten countenance became bronzed with a richer tinge at the notion of any girl (for all ladies under thirty appeared to him as such) liking him sufficiently to marry him, it stood a chance of deepening to permanent copper-colour at the idea of having a domestic hearth at last.

He was now in a position to command one.

Prissy's good humour, sterling worth, and homely character struck him as peculiarly calculated to make him the exact wife he required. Her youth—for he considered her very young at twenty-seven—made up for want of much beauty, her warm-heartedness for cleverness, and her high principles for wisdom. He felt sure the whole force of her affections would be settled on her home. And was not that just the sort of wife he required

at his age? If Prissy lived with those she loved, it might not be inaptly said of her, "that town would be country to her, and country town, the desert a garden, the wilderness peopled;" she would see only with the eyes of those she loved.

But seventeen years difference in age was not to be rashly set aside. It behoved him to ask whether, in the new pleasure that was breaking into sunshine over his heart, its rays had not rather obscured his mental vision.

First of all, he consulted Mr. Asheton, his oldest friend. Indeed, it was to that old friend he owed the original perception of the idea, being too diffident himself. Mr. Asheton had told him how he wished him to be connected with him—one of themselves.

(Oh, ye realms of incomprehensible matter, tell us from what thick and murky cloud you gathered this extraordinary fact, and put it into the brain of one of these haughty Ashetons, that he would be pleased to be united so intimately to a dealer, buyer, seller, agent for Carrara marble!)

This apostrophe is supposed to be what Mrs. Trevor would have said, had she heard her brother broach such an idea; but there are strong historical doubts of her ever having heard him. From Mr. Asheton he went to Lady Gordon. Her assent was not so cordial. She loved Prissy dearly, but she was not so certain that she would make a good wife, or rather, efficient housekeeper. Wishing for no corroboration on that matter—as few people do when they have made up their minds not only to marry, but whom to marry—Mr. Courtenay went to her father and mother.

Here, sad to say, he met still stronger opposition. But as this did not appear to arise from any personal objection to himself, his age, or his fortune; having, moreover, experienced, during his eventful life, that the more desirable a thing is, the harder it is to get; and, finally, having equally experienced the good effects of a dogged determination, he did not make himself the least unhappy. He only decided he would have her, and to make that decision unalterable but by Prissy herself, he went straight away and asked her.

That Prissy should fall into a state unlike any other state that anyone had ever seen her in before, was not wonderful, and the only thing that brought her to, was that unkind May saying so unfeelingly, "Love was a very stupid thing, and she advised her never to have anything to do with it." If Prissy had forgotten her own words, Mr. Asheton had not, nor the occasion. With

glowing eyes he looked at Marion. Either purposely, or really indifferent, she was gaily laughing, never looking his way.

So, passing behind her unseen, he possessed himself of one hand, whispering, "My May, are our children to learn such words from their mother, say?" And his breath stirred her thick curls.

"No," said Marion, blushing, yet honest in spite of herself. He drew her with one sudden clasp to his heart—so sudden that no one saw them, so rapid that he was gone ere she could turn either in anger or expostulation. It did not appear that Mr. or Mrs. Flower had any objection to Prissy's marrying, beyond the fact that they had no idea she ever would marry. Their beautiful Beatrice had never even had an offer, and she was thirty years old. Therefore it struck them that Prissy, not so favoured by nature, would never have an offer at all, or perhaps not until she was forty. Surprise, therefore, acted the unkind part in the wooing of Mr. Courtenay; but, as we have seen, he was not easily daunted, and, having secured Prissy's own consent, he suffered all the others to settle for themselves.

Meantime, Mrs. Trevor was not idle. Though the mother of heiresses, it yet became her to shine forth in other ways. She had not yet settled how she was to set about it. That the matrimonial relations between Mr. and Mrs. Asheton were not such as their friends could wish, was now patent to her mind.

Whether she should take part with her brother, and urge a separation and divorce under the new Act of Parliament, and get Lady Gordon, under another new impending act, to take the vacant place, she did not know. She imagined it would be difficult, but it was very desirable. Her brother evidently had the highest esteem for Lady Gordon; it might look odd, yet, as Asheton happiness was concerned, oddities must give way to expedience. But then Marion, what could she do? Certainly, Marion was very much improved; she admired her, she had acted well. Her present pride of stately womanhood was natural. In fact, Mrs. Trevor would have acted in just the same manner.

What should she do? It would be as well, perhaps, to write to Sir Robert Fane, and in visiting upon his head the unfortunate circumstances relating to the estrangement of Mr. and Mrs. Asheton, urge him as a gentleman, a man of honour, a Christian, to come forward and confess how culpable he had been, how villanous were his deeds.

"Villanous, Aunt Trevor!" exclaimed Edward, "I only told uncle Asheton it would be fine—we could ride."

"You were talking to yourself, Aunt Trevor, as you often do," interrupted the impatient Rupert. "Oh, father, we must ride."

"Let me hear Edward's reason for thinking it will be fine," answered his father.

"Those straight, streaky clouds, Uncle Asheton, are, as you know, *cirri*, and when placed up there, denote fair weather. If those *cumuli*, the round clouds, were above them, it would be wet. Now they are in their proper place, near the earth."

"Oh, father, I want to learn all these things," said Rupert.

"Aunt May knows everything of that sort."

"We will get her to teach us all," said Mr. Asheton. "Now for our ride."



CHAPTER LXXI.

IT BECOMES MARION'S TURN TO LET MRS. TREVOR SEE SHE IS NOBODY,
WHICH SHE DOES WITHOUT SPEAKING A WORD.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the successful party. Mr. Courtenay's leave was nearly over, but he had succeeded in carrying out his determination. He was to be married to Miss Priscilla Flower in six weeks from that date. Mrs. Flower moped; she began to wonder how she was to live without Prissy. Never having calculated upon losing her, the approach of such a calamity came as a stunning blow.

Prissy comforted her, after a sort of Prissy fashion.

"You know, mamma, London is not so far off, and I have always wanted to live in London. I hate the country—the walks are not paved, and there's such a smell of flowers that way, and seaweed this way; and I always forget the day the butcher comes. Now, he says in our street the butcher is not two doors off—think how nice!"

That pronoun, "he," answered at present, in Prissy's eyes, for one person. Also it stood for both Christian and surname.

Mrs. Trevor was deep in some mystery under cover of her

present absence of mind, the young heiresses and their father showed a few natural traits in their character, unrebuked.

Kythe was low—her May was more stubborn than she deemed her nature could be. The many hopes she had given Godfrey began to fade even in the expectation of them.

Godfrey was undeniably sad. No hindrance was ever made to his entrance into that low upper chamber on the plea of seeing his children. Taking advantage thereof, he had searched, if haply in some weak time, forgotten since, he could discover one object kept as a souvenir of himself. There was nothing. His portrait was open to all, on the drawing-room table. The presents he had made her aforetime were all there too, publicly displayed. To be sure, they were not the sort of presents, he felt now, a lover would have bestowed upon the one loved of his heart; vases, books, objects of *virtu*, meant as much to adorn his house as to please his wife, were the kind he had bestowed.

Yet her room was filled with the gifts of others. "I do not mean to relax, Kythe, though Courtenay thinks a little indifference might have a good effect. He does not know my Marion. Even the children begin to think their mother loves them too well, because she appears to love their father too little. Last night, Rupert, for he told me when I went to look at him ere I went to bed, spoke to her, and said—'Mother, if we have been the cause that you will not love our father, I wish I was dead.'

"How know you that I do not love him, Rupert?' she asked.

"Because, mother, our father is unhappy. He becomes more pale and thin everyday; and he looks at you, mother, when you do not observe, and I see all his heart in his eyes. Do not you know, as well as we do, that Ashetons can die, and say nothing if it touches their pride.'

"I know Ashetons better than you, love; your father will not die.'

"Then love him, mother, once again.'

"What! Can you think you have so base a mother that she cannot love the father of her Rupert? Sleep, sleep, naughty boy, and think no more such vile calumnies.' And she put him off thus, Kythe."

"I augur well from that, Godfrey; had she really cared nothing, she would have answered more openly."

"Father, father," called Rupert, running in breathless to

Maxwell's lodgings, "come quickly to the Court. My Uncle Fane arrived suddenly, and he told me to tell you Aunt Trevor has sent for him, but he would see no one without your permission. He said he would not have come at all, but that he understood it was necessary. He is in the summer-house, and Edward is with him."

"Godfrey, this explains a late mystery in your sister's demeanour," said Lady Gordon. "I can assure you she has both love and admiration for Marion, but it is more natural she should have them for you. I think she has sent for Sir Robert Fane on purpose to expostulate with Marion; I fear this may not be judicious."

"Nothing less so. I will not have her troubled. They cannot understand her nature. Run back, Rupert, and say I am coming. You will perhaps return with me, Kythe, to shield her, as I must do."

Quickly as they followed, Rupert met them again.

"She is there; they are all there. Aunt Trevor watched his arrival, and brought my mother to him, all unknown to her. And it was arranged before with Uncle Flower, Mr. Courtenay, and that good-for-nothing Prissy, smiling and smirking. Edward just ran out to tell me. Oh, father, let me too, enter; I wish to tell my mother that I also shall scarcely love her, if she does not love you."

"My boy, am I to owe your mother's love to compulsion? No; it must be her free gift, or I will live without it."

Rupert snatched his father's hand, and put it to his lips for a moment.

As Godfrey and Kythe entered that often-mentioned summer-house where the stony huntress yet prepared her bow, and still looked eager for the chase, Mrs. Trevor was undisguisedly troubled; evidently she had composed a notable play, but all the actors were misplaced. Suddenly two persons appear who have no right on the stage at all.

As they entered, Marion was just uttering the words—

"I have read it all, Mr. Courtenay; believe me not unjust."

Edward withdrew from his watch by his Aunt Marion's chair as he saw them, and joined Rupert outside.

Godfrey advanced towards Sir Robert Fane, and held out his hand.

"Indeed, will you indeed act thus by me?" he faltered.

"I know not," said Mr. Asheton, with that peculiar clearness of voice that bespeaks equal frankness of heart, "why you

should think I would not. If, in a perverted state of mind and body, I believed that which was to my own disadvantage, I injured but myself. My wife, nobler-natured, escaped that self-upbraiding which is my lot. I quarrel not with what is just. May I ask why you are all here?"

Mrs. Trevor, reassured, explained that, having gained the presence of Sir Robert Fane through an appeal to his feelings, she thought he ought to establish a perfect understanding between man and wife, and she had assembled all the others to corroborate his words, in case Marion should cavil at his statements.

"Sister, I cannot thank you for your sympathy—it is most ill-judged. I have refrained from upbraiding you with the past, trusting that you would yourself see that your power with me is gone. By the memory of our father and mother—we are brother and sister—ask me not for more. Had I known this, I might have spared you all the trouble—my wife this ill-timed molestation. In justice to her, I must explain that I proved, even before I married her, that I was not worthy of her affection. In my marriage settlement, a clause was inserted at my express wish, against the advice of both my father and mother, providing a sum of two thousand a year, for the support and maintenance of my wife, in case I chose to leave her. Again, in justice to her, I protest to you all, that, on the very instant of restoring her children to her, my wife pardoned me for whatsoever I had made her suffer on their account. But—and who amongst you with wife or daughter can blame her?—she would not live with me, subjected to the insult of this clause. The law gives me no power to undo my act. My own heart forbids me to blame my wife for a decision that demands admiration, increases my love, yet makes both an increasing torture to me. Let me beseech you, therefore, to leave her to the dictates of a heart we all know to be unmatched for tenderness—to a judgment that will be candid in spite of itself. That I have never yet availed myself of this unhappy clause, prompted by no better motive than a whim; that when it was brought forward, it was only an act of justice to her; and that I felt its evil nature so bitterly that the disgrace clings to me now, and makes me acknowledge here, before you all, that my punishment is but right; these are facts which in time will be considered by the mother of my children as a plea for the forgiveness of their father. I will wait until then."

Kythe looked up into Marion's face with that tender beseech-

ing a mother might use to a wayward, passion-driven child. The only response was a silent kiss; she then turned and looked at Mr. Asheton, who, interpreting the look, opened the door for her to pass out. As he closed it after her, Kythe said, softly :—

“Oh, Godfrey, I am disappointed in her.”

“I am disgusted,” said Mrs. Trevor, who must be angry with some one.

“I must needs exert my authority,” murmured Mr. Flower.

“You expected too much, Kythe, and you, Ellinor, have no right to judge her, even if you could understand her character. Let me beg of you, my dear sir, to do nothing further in this matter. The word ‘authority’ can have nothing to do with her; she is under a control far higher than ours. Let me thank you all—at least those who had no restitution to make for thoughts and deeds which I, fortunately, have not the right to investigate. It is best known to them how much they owe me, and I am willing to consider the debt cancelled by their efforts now, even though they have been fruitless.”



CHAPTER LXXII.

MR. ASHETON SEES A GLEAM OF SUNSHINE IN HIS CLOUDY SKY.

As Mr. Asheton went silent and alone out of the summer-house, “Father,” whispered Rupert, “she has gone there—oh! dearest father, she told me to tell you she was gone down there. She said no more.”

Heartily embracing his son, with hope and elation springing from his heart to his face, Mr. Asheton changed his listless, slow step to one that almost bounded.

“There,” he felt, meant but one spot. It was there they parted four years ago, where he told her that he should never love any other woman. He was so rapid in his movement, that he caught a glimpse of her through the trees, and moderated his speed, so as to reach the spot at the same time as she herself.

She flushed violently as she saw him. He uttered no word, but drew her towards him, and she did not repel the embrace as heretofore,

"I—I would wish to be just. I know that in truth you never more thought of that thing, after you had ordered it to be drawn up—until—until, perhaps, you imagined I required it."

"You judge me rightly."

"And no law can alter it?"

"Even if it could, Marion, I would not wish but that my love for you should be the truest shield you had."

"Love is better than law, that I grant. It will not quibble or strain at flaws. I could not say, what I would have said, before all those people."

And blushes, like those of a maiden confessing her first love, stole over her face.

"And what would you have said, my May?"

He would have called her a thousand love-names, but he dared not yet.

"Nothing—nothing more—pray release me; but what all you said I acknowledge to be true. I felt what Kythe felt; but—but you do not know—you are not capable of loving. Had I gone, as you did, four years ago, I should have remembered whom I left behind, rather than those who were with me, and—"

"Returned in six weeks! Say, is it not this you would have done? Well, so would I, had not what I considered a sacred duty withheld me. Oh! May, within six weeks of leaving you, I had well nigh wished myself childless; and, feeling that it was likely this longing would grow stronger, I bound myself by a solemn oath to remain one year. Then shame withheld me; I could not return you your children so unlike the children I took from you. But excuses do not become me, and are but insulting to you. It is enough that you know I have never had a happy moment without you."

Marion tried to hide her face; he strove to see it.

"I ask for nothing, but that you will call me Godfrey once more. I ask it, because my love has never erred against you—nothing but my judgment. Say Godfrey."

"What! love me still, when I was that which Beatrice said I was?"

"Yes, more fervently than ever. Call me Godfrey."

"Love me, yet not return to me?"

"'Tis true; yet I declare I loved and thought of nothing but you. I was willing at times to forego everything, so that I might hold you thus once more. Marion, if, in the first burst of agony at hearing of my mother's death and your presumed im-

prudence, I obeyed those instincts of family pride so fostered and imbedded in Asheton natures, cannot your own true heart tell you that remorse has broken them up, root and branch? Now let me hear my name once more spoken by your lips; 'tis but a small request."

"Yes, unlike Mr. Asheton—"

"That Mr. Asheton, your first husband, is dead. He was a sorry fellow; I intend making no further excuses for him; I never think of him without a shudder—don't you?"

"No," began Marion.

"No!—then you love him still, Marion?"

She was silent.

"I am not jealous of him; but I would rather be the dead Asheton, if you love his memory, than the living one. I cannot alter, Marion; your cold and haughty husband is gone. I can never promise to be otherwise than your lover, sworn to an everlasting reverence for your virtues—vowed to never-ceasing service for your love. Will you accept Godfrey, and love him?"

"This Godfrey must remember," whispered Marion, in fluttered words, "that to be accepted now might wear the appearance of a deference to the wish of others. The Godfrey I loved would wait—will wait—until—"

"Until," echoed Mr. Asheton, drawing back the curls from her face—

"Go on," she said.

"Marion herself says, Godfrey, I love you."

In his eagerness to look into her eyes, he half withdrew his clasp round her waist. She suddenly sprang from him, and fled.

He watched her disappearing; leaning against a tree, for his agitation was great, but his eyes were towards heaven, his lips moved. He was yet absorbed, when Kythe appeared in sight; he went to meet her.

"Was Marion flying from you, Godfrey?"

"Yes, truly."

"I am disappointed—I am concerned—"

"Dearest Kythe—truest, best sister—I am not; there is a break in my sky of darkest night. I am not yet blest, but the delay is caused by a motive so expressive of her womanly nature, I can but love her the more. I am not to owe to any one but herself the restoration to my place in her affections; and, Kythe, is not this so truly like our sensitive, shy, but most loving Marion—we have too many eyes upon us at present—a recon-

ciliation would form a public family act, unfitting the solemn binding together once more of two souls who were nearly separated by worse than death—by Wrong and Ruth—those fiends that pile up mountains of secret misgivings, with broad rivers of the thickened waters of ever-stirring recriminations, that flow the faster, as you think, to land. Oh! Father beneficent, of all the blessings Thou hast so bountifully showered on me, for none do I thank Thee more than for this escape from a most just punishment. No receding shore is mine—fleeting—failing. I inhale the breath of coming happiness. Excuse me, sister; but think of me. In some moment of time—some solemn, quiet hour when nature is at rest, the birds at roost, the flowers folded up in deep repose, the moon most shy of silvery light, not a leaf moving, not a stir of air, no eye near, in a dim, soft, dewy night, I shall hear the words whispered in my ear, ‘Godfrey, I love you.’ Think of the bliss of existence expecting them!”

“Dearest Godfrey, you restore me to comfort again. She passed me so rapidly—coloured, as I thought, with anger.”

“Ah, Kythe, it was a blush; when I was endeavouring to see it, she escaped my clasp—a blush that gives me this pulse of ecstasy. She has a heart for me still; and that she knew it so, sent this innocent shame straight from it.”

“How well you understand her, brother. For my part, I was unhappy; I thought my Marion was gone—that gentle Marion who calmed to sanity a shattered brain.”

“She can do all things by the mere might of that gentleness. And now, Kythe, in this one thing you can assist me. You are aware that we are becoming popular. Invitations pour in upon us. That kind old duchess will take no denial. In accordance with the desire of repairing many a former mistake, I am anxious to respond to these various proffers of hospitality and friendship. Hitherto I have warded them off by saying I did not wish at present to tear my wife from her children. But now that their regular instructors are coming, and that she will not be so tied down to them, will you bid her think of the eldest child among them, grey-headed, but still not the less eager to learn? Ask her if I am to go alone into the society where I am to learn these new duties; or that, trusting to that feeling which will keep me chained down in coldest decorum, rather than lose this pleasure, she will accompany me? Tell her that, when alone with her, I will ever remember to help the mother of my children to respect herself.”

"If she judges of you by her usual standard, even as she would herself be judged, I feel sure she will consent."

"Surely this is my sister approaching—she appears disturbed."

Mrs. Trevor, keenly disappointed at the failure of her grand plot—still more so at the open slight, or rather censure, passed upon her brother—was inclined to be universally chagrined with every one, and came to Lady Gordon for comfort.

"Sister," said Godfrey, kindly, "are you not invited, as well as ourselves, to dine at G—— Abbey?"

"We are so; and of course I have no mind to go, exposing family feuds in the glaring way Mrs. Asheton likes to do."

"But if she accepts, will you? The reply ought to go."

"I have no objection, provided you undertake that there is no family scene."

CHAPTER LXXIII.

BADLY AS MR. ASHETON HAS CONDUCTED HIMSELF THROUGHOUT THIS HISTORY, HE OUTDOES HIMSELF IN THIS CHAPTER.

It was the night of the G—— Abbey dinner-party. Marion had given a reluctant consent, which she sorely repented as the time drew near. Godfrey endeavoured to be as stony as the Mr. Asheton of old, until he discovered that her reluctance arose more from leaving her children (a first, though short, separation) than from fear of him. They, however, were much above regretting it themselves; Aunt Kythe had a tea-party on the sands; and delightful as it would have been to have mamma there to help on the fun, still she could not have done so in that beautiful dress which made her look so pretty, they would not have missed the sight for anything.

They were to go four in the coach, so Marion was pretty safe, even had Godfrey been inclined to be too polite. Mrs. Trevor entered first; Marion following, seated herself opposite to her. Mr. Trevor, with that blundering stupidity which always caused him to do the wrong thing, from the time he awoke until the time he was safely asleep again, was about seating himself on the same side as Marion. Perhaps it was the quick peremptori-

ness with which Mr. Asheton ordered him to sit by his wife that coloured Marion's cheeks so vividly. Certainly Mr. Trevor was himself so bewildered that he never recovered the shock the whole drive. And as Mrs. Trevor kept up a running commentary to him the whole way, of how absurd he was not to know the right seat which custom, laws, and rules ordained should be his when the unusual number of four people had to go in the coach, Godfrey had ample time to enjoy the rare pleasure of being seated close to his wife, almost inhaling her breath.

He thought he would be careful not to encroach; yet it was irresistible trying to seek her hand, which, when found, proved a sort of timid, shy hand, ready to fly at the first touch. So, as as if his was a dead inanimate, lifeless thing, he let it lie quiescent on hers, until its timidity gave place to security. hapless little hand! At its highest moment of blind confidence, it was made so fast a prisoner, it could not release itself without making more stir than the imprisonment was worth. So it remained passive, submissive. Fortunately, ere greater liberties were taken with it, the time came for drawing on of gloves, and with a sudden, unexpected resistance, it was free. But the pleasure of that drive, the certainty that it must occur again soon, within an hour or so, imparted a very becoming happiness to Mr. Asheton's face.

The amiable duchess greeted them both with much satisfaction. If Marion did not look quite so happy as her husband, she imputed it to the fact that she might feel a little embarrassed, so long secluded from society.

Nos. 1 and 2 were not there; important members as they appear to have been in ——shire, judging by their reports being considered worth believing and retailing, they had never yet penetrated the exclusive circle of G—— Abbey, otherwise they would have found much food for comment, not to say astonishment.

How agreeable and intelligent was Mr. Asheton; how his wife never spoke, low as was her voice, that he did not hear what she said; how he appeared to dote on and admire her; how the duke said he had never seen so lovely a face, the expression being so confiding—so innocent; and how Mr. Asheton answered, her face was her least perfection. How the duchess petted and made much of her; and how Mrs. Trevor was annoyed, not to say indignant, that, in order to hear Marion sing, the duchess rose up and left Mrs. Trevor, on the very point of telling her the most interesting item in the history of the Miss

Trevors; and how Marion sang very prettily, accompanying herself, which made Mrs. Trevor think to herself that all along Marion must have been a very good musician, only she had not chosen to allow it.

And the old feelings came back to her heart of dislike and anger. Mr. Trevor, too, stumbled over a stool, and broke a priceless saucer, the cup, still full of coffee, alighting safely in the embroidered lap of a stately old countess, who, grim and sallow, looked as if she never would forgive him, and 'probably never did.

And how the duchess asked, so beseechingly that Marion could not deny her, that, some time, they would all come and pass a week with her, bringing those three children who had caused such mighty doings in the family. But they could not tell what passed in the coach going home; how Mrs. Trevor, at her old practices, irritated beyond the curb of reason, began to upbraid Marion; how Marion, unused to such late hours, laid back her fair head, and slept like a child; how Mrs. Trevor, taking advantage thereof, and determined to say something or die, brought the full force of her indignation to bear upon Godfrey; how he, unheeding her, was still more base to the unconscious Marion, cautiously, deceitfully inserting one arm round her, gradually bringing that fair head on to his shoulder; how that beautiful brow lay close to his lips; and how, by degrees, those lips came nearer and touched it, and having done so, touched again.

Mrs. Trevor, after one or two direct appeals for an answer, and receiving none, concluded that her brother, like the two others, was a prey to fatigue and sleep; yet she was startled by the flashing of the lamps revealing something like glowing eyes opposite to her; she concluded it was the sparkle of Marion's head-dress.

As for Mr. Trevor (low be it spoken) he was not asleep, only he often found it convenient to appear so.

Godfrey was incorrigible. However, as Marion was not aware of all he did when she was asleep, it perhaps did not appear so unreasonable to her, his request to come and see his children ere he retired to rest.

But he lingered so long, and she was so tired, she began to be indignant.

"Call me Godfrey, then, and I will go at once."

"I will do no such thing; you are very unkind, keeping me waiting so long."

"It is so small a request. Will you do it?"

"No; now go, for I have rung for Stephenson."

"Then thus I revenge myself."

Snatching her in his arms, he kissed her rapidly, until, hearing Stephenson's step, he placed her, breathless and indignant, on the sofa, and ran out. Marion was very cold to him for some days after this, but he was very penitent, and besought her forgiveness most humbly.

"I am not used," said he, half smiling, "to these strong English wines; they must have got into my head."

He delighted to see she was even more angry at the excuse than at the original crime.

"I never thought to hear an Asheton use a subterfuge," quoth she.

"Poor wretches, they are but mortal after all, Marion. It is true, however, what you think. You yourself intoxicated me."

"I think nothing about it," answered she, angrily.

He was more discreet the next time they dined out, but he allowed of no refusals. Though he knew nothing of Doctor Johnson's declaration, that driving in a chaise with a pretty woman is the extreme bliss of life, he yet experienced an inordinate delight in so doing. Especially as once or twice they had to go alone, and, moreover, would soon do so altogether, for Mrs. Trevor was about to withdraw from them the light of her amiable presence.

She was not doing herself or them any good by remaining longer; yet she clung to the belief that she was as necessary to her brother as ever, until even Mr. Trevor perceived they were to stop.

Prissy's marriage was imminent; Mrs. Trevor had her reasons for not wishing to be present at it. In the high state of excitement into which those Flowers were forcing themselves, in endeavouring to keep pace with their superiors, Mrs. Trevor was fearful lest they should put an indignity upon the heiresses, and ask them to be bridesmaids; which, secretly, those young ladies, unworthy of so discriminating a mother, were most anxious to be. Having tasted the excitement of being in love, though the object of their joint admiration had not only disregarded the fond appeal, but had returned to Eton in the highest possible state of glee in parting from them, they were anxious to increase their experience in such delightful affairs. But their mother was as inexorable in her way as Edward in his. Not even the knowledge that the duchess (self-invited) intended to honour the wedding with her presence moved her.

Indeed, the real truth was, she had no excuse to stay. No one asked her to do so. Her brother, she could not but perceive, longed for her departure, more that he might have Marion to himself than to be rid of his sister. She was an object now of almost perfect indifference; and she had not sufficient discrimination to see that her efforts to regain her position in his estimation were endangering even that remnant of his regard.

A little more, and he might despise as much as he had reason to condemn her. She really was grieved to part with Lady Gordon, and promised most gladly to pay her a visit in Scotland. She felt a better woman after talking to Kythe, and, unconscious of the reason, loved to be in her society. The calm and holy peace of such a character cast a radiance on those within her circle.



CHAPTER LXXIV.

IN WHICH, THOUGH BUT ONE WEDDING IS CELEBRATED, SOMETHING
VERY LIKE TWO WAS SOLEMNISED.

It being considered orthodox to end a history by a marriage, we will not depart from the general rule.

Behold a beautiful day. Prissy had been sure that it would rain—not the usual rain, commonly designated “cats and dogs;” but a fearful, overwhelming, tempestuous rain, that might be properly styled, in aggravated distinction from the other, “bulls and bears.”

During the days of courtship, Prissy’s moods had been various. While Mr. Courtenay was present, so happy and contented a Prissy never was seen. She basked in the sunshine of his broad countenance; she relied on his slightest word as upon an oracle; she would have faced any danger under his protection, without the slightest disposition to scream. She was full of vanities and peremptorinesses about her garments. *His* bride must, of course, be very particularly dressed.

But when he was absent, when he had to return to London to attend to his business, she was a totally different Prissy. She became low, desponding, hysterical.

She would not regard her fine things; no, perhaps she might never require them.

It was all very well bidding her try on her wedding-dress *he* was not going to marry her for her dress.

It was very kind of Kythe and Marion, getting such pretty bridesmaids' dresses for their little girls; but there were only three of them, and whoever heard of an uneven number of those necessary articles.

This terrible misfortune being done away with by the duchess, who promised to bring a granddaughter, a little Lady Adela, stately as the Demoiselle Issa, and of her own age, still Prissy kept up the desponding mood.

"I think I must write and tell Mr. Courtenay that you are sorry, and do not wish to be married."

"Oh, you unkind May, did I behave like that to you, when you were in love?"

"Was she in love, Prissy?" asked Godfrey. "I think she has no heart—she never was in love."

"Oh, but she was, dreadfully; far worse than me. She said one day—now don't interrupt me, May—that women's love was a pitiable thing. Once it got into the heart, there was no getting it out; and really I think that is quite true."

"Is it true, May?" asked her husband.

"A good, noble love, such as Kythe's for her Alan, remains. It is the pulse of the heart. But other sorts of love soon go—like that,"—and she blew the seeds of a dandelion away, in an indifferent, rather saucy, manner, that made Godfrey long to punish her, beat her, kiss her. One, he rather thought, would be as disagreeable to her as the other.

"See, Prissy, here is my present to you."

"Dear, dear, a present! You know, May, I don't care for presents from you, because I love you."

"And I give them to you for that reason, also because I love you."

"A watch! Oh, if I break it now. Mamma always said I was not fit to have a watch, I was so careless."

"But if you are fit to be Mr. Courtenay's wife, surely you are fit to be trusted with a watch?"

"Of course, dear May, no doubt about that; it is such a little beauty. How pleased he will be! You always think of such nice things, May."

"And here is my present, Prissy," said Godfrey.

"What, another? Oh! now this is too much. It's quite

happiness enough, you know, that I'm going to be—that is, he, I mean—May, May, how unkind you are, you know what I mean.”

“Mean! You must mean something very naughty, you blush so, Prissy.”

But shortly Marion's blushes outrivalled Prissy's. Godfrey's present was a bracelet; within the clasp was a miniature likeness of Marion, with little doves nestling all about her.

She ran off, not wishing to hear more of Prissy's delight, and of Godfrey's declarations that it was not sufficiently pretty.

Mr. Rupert Asheton was best-man, a proper act of friendship to dear old Courtenay. If the bride and bridegroom were not very handsome specimens of the human race, at all events they were attended to the altar by very beautiful children, and their wedding was as pretty a sight as needs be seen.

The best-man was a little put out in the morning because his mother would not allow him the dignity of “stick-ups.” And the little bridesmaids were rather bewildered, because the bride promised them all four the distinguished situation of holding her gloves.

Marion mended that matter by distributing Prissy's property into four parts—two gloves, one handkerchief, and one bouquet, to which was further added a vinaigrette. So their little hands were well employed.

But the united efforts of everybody had not been sufficient to prevent Mrs. Flower dissolving into such floods of tears that the bridegroom declared he was so damp he feared catching the rheumatism, sitting next to her at breakfast. This remark she understood literally, so, what between her endeavours to keep dry and her anxieties about the breakfast, the jellies being perversely placed where the pastry should have been, and various other little *contretemps*, she contrived to bear up. In fact, Mr. Courtenay was so funny and amusing, that neither Prissy nor her mother had time for much weeping until the speeches came.

Oh, those sad speeches, which, if they begin with a melancholy turn, arrive at last at perfect misery; if complimentary, at the topmost pillar of nonsense; if merry, good luck to the wedding.

Mr. Asheton had to begin. Though about his first essay at public speaking, his heart was so warm to “dear old Courtenay,” his gratitude so great to that good Prissy, he made a most eloquent, yet sincere, speech, in drinking the health of the bride and bridegroom—so touching in some of its allusions, that many

more besides Mrs. Flower broke into a sudden gush of tears—so humble in the little he said of himself, that even Marion's eyes were lifted up to his in open defiance of the self-censure.

That look well rewarded him. He sought it again, and it was not withheld. And so full was he of this unexpected fortune, that, until universal laughter aroused him, he was not aware that the bridegroom was returning thanks.

A very nice, sensible speech, as full of dry humour as happiness—and remarkable at the end of it for the entire disregard Prissy paid to the name of Mrs. Courtenay, even looking round in evident amazement at so stupid a person not answering when she was so often invoked. Mr. Courtenay brought her to a proper sense of her own forgetfulness, by apologizing for giving her a name she evidently intended to disown, and begged to know if they should return to church, and get the marriage all undone again. Prissy, in half fear, now rushed into the contrary extreme, and answered for both herself and him. This, however, did not prevent him rising to propose the health of the bridesmaids, in which, departing from the usual course in wishing them speedily in the same situation as the bride, he paid them many pretty compliments, bidding them go on in following the examples of their mothers; "For," said he, "when I and my Prissy are old, and tied by age and infirmity to the chimney nook, she reading the newspaper aloud to me, how delightful will it be to see notices of good and noble ladies doing their duties in this grand old England of ours, and foremost among them all, the names of our little bridesmaids. It will make us both young in heart again."

And thereupon, the little bridesmaids, fired by this idea, enthusiastically answered they would be sure to remember all Mr. Courtenay said, though they were hushed into immediate silence by the best man, who told them to hold their tongues; it was his business to return thanks for them. Which he did after a fashion that did not please them at all, for he said little about them, entering into some private ideas of his own, in which the bride was threatened with his supreme displeasure if she did not make a good wife to "dear old Courtenay."

Mr. Flower gave a homily upon marriage, in which he set forth the duties of husband and wife in rather a marked way. It was attentively listened to; but as Marion never raised her eyes, her uncle could not exactly tell whether she took any part of it to heart.

Mr. Asheton's speech, on returning thanks for the health of his wife, was short; but there was a dumb eloquence in his manner as he said "I thank you," and sat down, that left so solemn a silence behind it, none appeared able to break it, until he himself rose again, and proposed the health of Mrs. Flower—"Aunt Flower." (Oh, Mrs. Trevor, had you but been there, you might perhaps, in virtuous indignation, have kept your brother in some restraint; but in manly, straightforward words he eulogises Aunt Flower, the Duchess sitting there and hearing it all.)

It was not much that he said, but apparently perfectly sincere, for there is no mistaking truth.

Once more he caught a glance—could there be love in it? Certainly there was no hate; very much the reverse. He felt, if they were alone, in the dim twilight, he might have demanded, and she would not have denied, an answer—"Wherefore this glance?" Was his probation over? Had he proved sufficiently that the Mr. Asheton who had wronged her was indeed gone for ever; that he would frighten her no more with his pride and self-love? He startled himself, as well as all around, by the sudden crashing of the glass he held between his fingers—in his absence of mind, they had quivered with the strong hope in his heart. How he longed for the wedding to be over—for a space of time to breathe in and think alone. Not even the speaking intelligence of Kythe's sympathising glances could he bear. She watched Marion, even as he did himself.

But he was not to consider his own feelings; resolutely he must drive them away, and be amiable, agreeable, self-forgetting, as long as the revelry lasted. Prissy departed with the lower part of her face all smiles, and the upper part overflowing with tears. Mrs. Flower, oblivious as to what she was doing, as she lost sight of her dear Prissy, sat down, overpowered, on a jelly left in an inconvenient place by a careless servant.

All was over—carriages were ordered—people began to leave.

"I shall walk home," said Godfrey to Marion, "after I have seen Kythe safe to her house, therefore do not keep the children waiting for me."

So, congratulating each other on the successful termination of the day, "good-nights" were said, and poor Mrs. Flower was allowed to go off to bed, and weep as much as she pleased.

"Now, children, jump in," said May to her little ones. "I

think I shall run down to Aunt Kythe's, to see that she is not too tired."

"Mother," whispered Rupert, "now be a kind mother, and walk home with my father."

"He is at home, long ago, you naughty best-man."

"Oh, is he?" responded the best-man, mockingly; but he jumped into the carriage with much alacrity.

At last Godfrey was free. He might wander now until day-dawn up and down those woods, thinking over those half-bashful, yet ingenuous glances, and conjecturing if he might demand wherefore they were bestowed on him.

"My May is so strangely resolute," said the more gentle Kythe to him, ere they parted, as if in extenuation of her hardness.

He made no answer.

"It would make me so happy to see you once more united, brother, ere I leave for Scotland."

"I cannot bid you wait, Kythe. I would not dare say when I may hope, blest as I am with the remembrance of her looks to-day. But when do you go, my chiefest and best comforter?"

"Very soon now. I only waited over Prissy's wedding, because, unheeding my deep mourning, the good, kind girl would take no denial. She brought me to May, she said, and it was the only favour I could do her in return, to be present at her marriage."

"Kythe, I shall come and see you in Scotland. I wish to consult you about a house I intend to build; wherein you may place your present landlady, as you like her so much, on the one condition that she lets her house to no one but you."

"An easy condition to fulfil; but where will you place it?"

"On a spot consecrated to me by more than one remembrance. I will make my Marion love that spot, in defiance of her obduracy. She shall visit it daily, hourly, as the abode of her sister—that sister left as a fond and sacred legacy to her care and love. And the very identical spot, the tree against which she leant, that shall be left untouched, in the centre of the garden. She shall not be able to see her Kythe, without passing under its shade. She can never visit her but remembrance shall be deeply stirred, with words, and vows, and sorrows all centred within it."

"Ah, Godfrey, I shall like my intended southern home the better if you build it together in united love. A blessing will

be upon this new home if hallowed with renewed vows, if consecrated by happy reconciliation. Let me wish you this, my brother."

"I accept the wish, Kythe; coming from you, it gives me faith and hope. Good-night."

And then he wandered forth—at first not sad. Kythe's words had soothed him.

Anon, another mood assailed him, an impatient, restless longing. Should he go home at once, and demand as but justice some little kind and gentle token, some tangible proof that these soft glances were realities, not illusive—a misconception?

But she might resent his claim, and command immunity from the very bounty of those looks, as more than she had ever yet conferred.

Impatiently he wandered through the trees, unheeding the sweet beauty of the night, lighted by a young moon, that, looking down upon the sea, was reflected back in two-fold radiance. Soft was the light, yet clear.

He could see, if he so desired, the very spot for Kythe's house, and how it could be placed so as to leave that tree untouched. He wandered there.

He paced it to and fro, he pictured it all to his mental vision, and unconsciously he passed from the contemplation of this design to the memories of past times.

He leant against the tree, brooding. The hope that Kythe had imparted to him began to fade. He murmured to himself aloud, as if in the voiceless air some winged spirit would answer and comfort him.

"Shall I trust her and ask? She is more generous-natured than most women, and could not trifle with me, even if she wished it. It was certainly one of her old, well-remembered fond glances. She must know I could not receive one from her unmoved. Oh, Marion—my Marion! shall I invoke you in the name of my father? By the love and tender duty you paid my mother? Can you thus doom the son they doted on, idolised, spoiled, to this living death? Can you not forgive me, love me, for their sakes?—for indeed, indeed, I am at the extreme verge of endurance."

As he stretched forth his arm, appealing, it seemed, to heaven in corroboration of his words, he felt a slight touch on the arm yet folded against his heart. Looking down, the gleam of the reflecting ocean revealed two little white hands laid upon it, as

long ago they lay, like flakes of snow. A form still somewhat in the shadow of the tree, was yet visible in likeness to one never forgotten; and a voice, soft yet clear, beseeching, as long ago it besought help for "her cousin," preferred again a petition—

"May I walk home with you, Godfrey?"

THE END.

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